[Oshi No Ko] Etude for Two

(Fan-Translation)

The following is a ***free*** English fan-translation by BennoSubs of the novel *[Oshi No Ko] Futari no Etude* by Aka Akasaka and Hajime Tanaka.
Their previous novel *[Oshi No Ko] Spica the First Star* has had an official English release by YenPress (It tells a story independent of this one so you don't need to have read it.)
https://yenpress.com/titles/9798855413212-oshi-no-ko-spica-the-first-star-light-novel.
This translation was done due to there not being an official English translation of this novel at the moment. That said, if an official English translation is ever published, I encourage everyone to support the official release.
Re-translations of this one to other languages are entirely allowed.
(If you paid for this translation you got scammed)

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Prologue

“You’ve always been like this. Ever since we were children, I can’t stand you.”
Kana Arima glared at Akane Kurokawa with the sharp gaze of a hunter aiming at its prey. Her target? Shiny, beautiful dark-colored hair and a meticulous gaze, paired with long, slender limbs. A fine, feminine figure, perfectly matched by a bow-tie blouse and mermaid skirt, which added a mature touch.
Well, I guess that if I were to talk solely about looks, then yeah, she's stunning. She could probably be a successful model if she wanted to. Akane Kurokawa possessed a type of serene beauty that Kana didn’t have.
And yet, Akane didn’t seem to think of herself as particularly beautiful, a behavior that gave her the reputation of “elegant,” “someone endowed with the virtue of modesty,” and “the ideal Japanese woman”[1]—all aspects that were driving Kana nuts.
However, the most annoying of all was this “elegance,” the one side she never seemed to show towards her.
“I’m the one who can’t stand you here. You’re always so full of yourself.”
Akane was always ladylike in front of others, yet for some reason she never held her tongue with Kana.
“What? When did I ever act full of myself?”
“Do you have no self-awareness? In every conversation you’re always trying to upstage me.”
Akane’s sharp eyes firmly locked on Kana.
“You were totally trying to upstage me, saying things like ‘He and I are basically childhood friends’ and ‘I know him better than anyone.’”
“Is saying the truth a crime now? We've been close since childhood; it's as simple as that.”
“Please, more like you were a leech he couldn’t get rid of. And let’s be real, we both know you two haven't actually kept in touch all this time.”

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[1] TN: Literally “The last Yamato Nadeshiko (ラスト大和撫子), a Japanese term used to describe women that display traditional virtues of femininity: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamato_nadeshiko

Here you go again, acting all high and mighty. Akane snorted, looking down on Kana and her petite figure.

This wench is a pain in the ass. Kana began to grit her teeth.

How could a girl so openly harsh toward her have monopolized the number one spot on every major site's popularity rankings? Men being deceived was one thing, but the real mystery was why even women liked her. *Are people these days really that blind?*

"By the way…" Kana said with a resentful grimace. "Haven't you been a little too cocky lately? You've made quite a few posts sharing glimpses of your dates with him."

"Huh?" Akane stared at Kana, confused. "You've been checking my posts? You seem pretty interested for someone who 'can't stand me.'"

"Argh!" Kana saw herself cornered with Akane's prompt response. However, she had no intention of backing down.

"I mean, I can't help it when your recent posts are so funny. It's like seeing the awakening of a young maiden who discovered poetry. Like, what the hell is this? 'My feelings are like buds, scattered around by the wind. As tender smiles gently fall like petals, a spring blossoms in my heart.' Honey, that's too much! The sappiness is so thick you could choke on it."

"Ah…" Akane stuttered, her cheeks as red as a lobster. Deep inside, even she probably had some notion of how cringey those posts came across.

"I was just trying to get into character for my next drama series. My agency—I mean, Kana-chan! We agreed not to bring our personal lives here."

"'The mere sight of your smile was like a peach breeze for my heart.' We got some peak fiction right here. 'Peach Breeze'? What the hell does that mean? I better screenshot this; I'm so not letting you forget these cringe posts."

"Look who's talking! 'Bell Pepper Exercise' is the real cringe here!"

"Ack." The shot was fired right back at her. Kana grimaced and writhed in pain as it hit an old wound.

"You love bringing that up, don't you? That song flew off the shelves; that makes it cool, not cringe."

"Ah, but you were so cute back then. You'd move your hips like this while singing and dancing with all those peppers—"

“Alright, alright! Stop! That’s it! Not one more word!”
Kana used her arms to form a big X in front of her face, blocking Akane’s remark. Her mind couldn’t bear any more of that discussion.
On the other side, Akane’s embarrassment was also considerable; her ears intensely flushed, and even her usual cool profile had turned beet red.
“Yeah, there’s no point in dragging this further.”
A glance at the clock on the practice room wall showed it was already 10 p.m.
It was 8 p.m. when they had entered the room, meaning the past two hours had been spent on nothing but a fruitless exchange.
“Ah,” Kana let out a big sigh.
“We may have gone a bit too far.”
“Yeah,” Akane said, pressing her palms to her temples as if she were suffering a headache. “Even though this should have been just a simple étude[2].”
Kana Arima and Akane Kurokawa had both been chosen to co-star in a production premiering next month. Titled *Thorn Sisters*, it was the new work of a famous director, telling a love story about two sisters who fall in love with the same man.
Their last time co-starring had been a few years ago in the movie *The 15-Year Lie*, directed by Taishi Gotanda. During this time, Kana and Akane built solid acting careers and came to be regarded as skilled young actresses across the industry.
As much as I hate to admit it, we need some practice outside rehearsals to get in sync since it’s been so long. With that thought in mind, Kana reluctantly invited Akane for some private rehearsal two days ago. Akane agreed with the proposal and immediately reserved a room for practice. The one they currently occupied was the property of the *Lala Lai Theatrical Company*, of which Akane was a member.
When they met in the room, they agreed to do an étude to get the feel for their roles. The theme matched the story “Two young sisters who fall in love with the same man.” However, shortly after they had begun, the étude turned into the bickering typical of those two. Their plans were forgotten, and the next two hours became an opportunity for them to say everything that came into their minds.
“Ah,” Kana sighed, realizing the time they had wasted.

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[2] *TN: While in English an étude typically refers to musical study pieces, in Japanese (エチュード), it has a broader meaning and can also be used to refer to other types of practice pieces, like improv acting exercises.*

“It seems I was too naive. I thought this could work now that we’re older, but we haven't changed a bit. You and I are still like water and oil.”
“Right?” Akane said, with a bitter smile. “You’ve always had this pitiful and twisted personality.”
“You got no filter, do you? Why am I the only one you’re so harsh on?”
“What do you mean? I always act the same with everyone. Perhaps your perspective is twisted too.”
“The only twisted thing here is your stubbornness.”
Kana pouted and, once again, began to stare at Akane, who stared back without backing down. It was a sassy, determined gaze of a girl who refused to lose to Kana.
“What a nice personality you have.”
Akane is really annoying, but I don’t have the time for this staring contest. We’re both busy celebrities; we can’t waste any more time being pigheaded like this.
Akane, seemingly agreeing, diverted her gaze, saying, “Let’s take this seriously.”
Kana shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah…”
Even this synchrony was far from being new to them.
Kana sighed while looking at the ceiling.
“I worry about this play; will everything be okay?”
“This feels nostalgic; it reminds me of the audition.”
“Audition?” Kana tilted her head. “Do you mean the one for this play?”
“No, no.” Akane shook her head without changing expressions. “I mean a much older one.”
“Older? Could it be… that one with the goddess?”
“Yep, that one.”
“Oh, now I remember.”
Akane’s dark eyes narrowed, almost like she was gazing at a distant past.
Kana also started to search deep inside her memories.
Our past is just so full of bitter memories.
An actress must seal off the past, detaching and isolating herself from it, so that her role may take hold of the deepest corners of her heart. Otherwise, even the faintest stray emotion could leak through and taint the persona she created.

However, Akane’s expression carried both a lingering attachment to the past and regret for the bitter memories it held. It was an enigmatic look that would be challenging to describe with words in a script.

Chapter 1

I want to become an actress like Kana-chan! That's my dream!
Akane Kurokawa was only eight when she said that during an interview for a theater magazine.
A predictable answer for the time. Back then, people in Japan who didn't know the famous child actress, Kana Arima, were few and far between, if they existed at all. She had sparkling, wide eyes, an angelic cuteness, and a smile innocent as a lamb, paired with an expertly crafted crying act. It was no wonder "The Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat" had decisively captured the hearts of Japanese households.
She was a daily presence in prime-time dramas. Not to mention her work on children's variety shows, educational programs, and steady appearances across various commercials for toys, children's clothing, and more. Kana Arima had become the icon for girls of Akane's generation.
I would rather be like Kana-chan than a fairy tale princess. Akane was far from being the only girl to think like this at the time.
And it wasn't just talk; she was genuinely putting real effort into becoming like Kana-chan.
She had cut her hair to a shoulder-length bob cut and began to wear soft and fluffy western clothes, never letting go of the trademark beret. She looked as similar to "Kana-chan" as she could possibly be.
For as long as Akane could remember, imitation was a deeply rooted passion, the one thing she could engross herself in.
What does this person like? How do they feel? What do they hate? What makes them angry? Akane would fully immerse herself in someone's emotions and meticulously pick apart the inner workings of their mind. The resulting resemblance was so precise and vivid that it blurred the line between her and the person she played.
Once, while copying Kana Arima's lines from a TV drama, the switch in demeanor was

so drastic, it left her parents speechless: “You were just like Kana-chan.”

Taking notice of their daughter’s aptitude, Akane’s parents began to strongly encourage her to pursue theater. This resulted in her joining the children’s theater troupe *Hydrangea,* where she eagerly devoted herself to acting, practicing every single day.

I want to be like Kana-chan. I want to stand beside her on stage and appear with her on TV. I want to be her friend. Her heart burned with a mix of enthusiasm and self-serving aspirations typical of a fan, helping to propel her efforts.

All of that resulted in her meeting with the real thing shocking her like nothing else ever had.

“Nobody gives a damn about acting.”

“I hate your kind the most. Quit imitating me!”

All of that happened during an audition for child actresses sponsored by a television station. Akane had finally fulfilled her life’s dream, meeting Kana Arima in the flesh. But the way it went down was nothing like she had envisioned.

Kana’s demeanor viciously overflowed with anger and disdain. She disclosed that the audition had been rigged in her favor, then coldly pushed Akane aside.

The “Kana-chan” Akane always admired was now cheating in an audition. And declaring how, in this industry, using a popular girl mattered more than the quality of the acting.

And then, Akane—naive to the harsh realities of show business, innocently idolizing “The Genius Child Actress, Kana Arima”—was cast aside by her heroine, who spat out the words, “I hate you.”

The young Akane felt like her whole world was turned upside down.

Kana-chan would never say that.

The Kana-chan whom Akane cheered for through the screen was someone who, in all senses, enjoyed acting. She could light up a scene with a radiant smile or flood a sad moment with a torrent of tears.

That kind of performance had to come from the heart—no one who believed that “acting doesn’t matter” could pull it off.

Why did Kana-chan say these things? I don’t understand. Did something happen to her? It must have.

The more she tried to make sense of the situation, the more lost she became.

Unsurprisingly, the audition ended in failure. Akane froze before the examiner, unable even to say her own name, and was rejected on the spot. Kana-chan, of course, was chosen—the decision had nothing to do with acting skill. In the days that followed, Akane sank into desolation. Kana-chan was all she could think about. She couldn't focus on school or even on theater practice.

"I hate you." "Quit imitating me." Kana's words from that day continued to haunt her mind.

I'm stupid; that's probably why I can't understand Kana-chan. I hate it when I can't understand something. More than that, I really want to know; I need an answer. Akane anguished as these thoughts ran through her mind.

It was around this time, during her last winter in elementary school, that talks about the previously mentioned audition reached Akane.

In front of a station on the Setagaya Line stood a large multipurpose building. Inside, a theater hall had been reserved for the audition.

It was the third Sunday of February, and a cold wind curled around the structure. Wrapped in a coat and scarf, Akane gazed up at it. Her darkly colored hair, which she tried to cover, whipped about in the north wind as she trudged forward, step by heavy step.

In her hand, she clutched an A4 sheet of paper: *Notice regarding the audition for the heroine of Shuugo Nijino's New Play.* Directions to the venue filled the rest of the page. She followed them carefully—into the lobby, into the elevator, and up to the proper floor. Yet anxiety clung to her the whole way. Even after coming this far, doubt still crept into her mind: *Was this really the right decision?*

The truth was, Akane hadn't even wanted to come. The word "audition" was already enough for Kana-chan's words, "I hate you" and "Quit imitating me," to flash in her mind. She wasn't even sure if she should continue to pursue theater. The idea that she had entered this industry for something as shallow as wanting to be in the same world as Kana-chan had begun to heavily weigh on her consciousness.

Yet, she had a reason to drag herself to this audition venue: a request that she could not refuse.

The one who convinced her was Okamura, the head of the *Hydrangea Theatrical Company.* In her late twenties and carrying more than fifteen years of stage experience, Okamura-san was both Akane's instructor and an older sister figure she trusted.

"For you see, this coming audition is for Shuugo Nijino's next production. I'd love if you could represent *Hydrangea* in it."

According to Okamura-san, this play was under the supervision of a man named Shuugo Nijino, a legend in the theater world. Well into his sixties, his reputation exceeded that of a genius; he was considered a wizard—one who would take all the time in the world to craft the stories he wanted to tell. He loathed sponsors and other third parties who tried to constrain his works in any capacity, so he chose the unorthodox path of taking everything into his own hands: scriptwriting, directing, casting, even fundraising and management of the venues.

The result was uncompromising work, polished to perfection, showered with critical acclaim not only in Japan but abroad, with him acquiring a cult following among theater enthusiasts.

Nijino-san's casting methods were also out of the ordinary. His auditions were the type you wouldn't see anywhere else.

The sheer number of actors who rose to prominence after being discovered in them was a testament to his keen eye. One such example is Yura Katayose, now landing lead roles in films and dramas. Nijino had spotted her talent when she was still in elementary school and seemed to anticipate her breakthrough into stardom.

"Shuugo Nijino's plays are a gateway into becoming a first-class actor." Okamura-san explained. "This one in particular is looking for girls in their early teens. The likelihood of the winner becoming the next breakout actress is huge. And it's not like he invites anyone. This is a special occasion. Nijino-san took notice of *Hydrangea* and went out of his way to leave one slot open for us."

Hearing her, Akane could only ask, "Why? Why would you give me such an important audition?"

"Because I believe you have the skills to pull it off, why else?"

Okamura-san gently smiled. Not out of flattery, but heartfelt assurance.
“I’m sure you can do it; no one is as dedicated as you.”
“But…” Akane said, unable to maintain eye contact. It was hard to say she had been able to give her all in acting ever since that incident with Kana-chan.
Is it really okay to give me an audition that important?
Sensing Akane’s unease, Okamura-san patted her gently on the head. “It’s okay,” she said. “I know you’ve been feeling down lately. But I know you, Akane-chan, and I’m sure you can get through this.”
That’s impossible. Akane thought, but didn’t say out loud. She couldn’t make light of all the faith Okamura-san had put in her.
“It’s okay if you fail,” Okamura-san said.
“Take this as an opportunity to test your skills while having fun acting. What do you say?”
I can’t refuse after she insisted that much. So Akane went on toward the venue, masking her anxiety.
In the elevator, she let out a sigh. *Can I even have fun while acting anymore?*
For her, acting was about imitation by channeling someone else's heart and soul. Until recently, that was little more than innocent fun. But now, every time she tried, she was laden with anxiety.
Is it really okay for me to imitate others? Am I not offending them by doing that?
Kana-chan’s words, “Quit imitating me,” stalked her mind. The more she tried acting, the more those remarks tightened around her heart.
Akane sighed again and again. *What if I fail?*
The elevator doors slid open with a chime. She had arrived at the conference room floor—the meeting place, it seemed, rather than the theater hall.
I don’t want to do this… but I have to.
Akane noticed the door with the sign *Audition Waiting Room* and nervously opened it. Inside the 11 m² small room, there were a few folding chairs lined up and six girls sitting on them. The moment she set foot inside, all of them, at once, glanced in her direction, their eyes seemingly scrutinizing her.
Looks like they’re also here for the audition. All girls in the room were around Akane’s

age, ranging from ten to 14 years old.

“Oh my, you seem to be Akane-san, correct? The girl from *Hydrangea*.”

In a surprisingly calm tone, one of the girls struck up a conversation with Akane. She had a sauvage hairstyle, a streamlined face resembling a doll, and porcelain-like white skin. *This girl seems to be Emily Takafuji-san from Moon’s Dream, another children’s theater troupe. From what I heard, she has an incredible amount of acting experience for a 13-year-old, as well as a knack for modeling and commercials.* She was the biggest rising star among Akane’s generation of actresses.

Using her beautiful marble-like eyes, she gazed at Akane’s face, intrigued.

“How surprising. So even girls like you were invited.”

You’re here despite having no notable achievements of your own. Akane read between Emily’s lines.

“Well, uh…” Akane mumbled. From a long time ago, she had the quirk of being easily intimidated by other girls with such commanding presence, taking a step back. She acknowledged it as a problem but couldn’t seem to fix it.

“Well, my troupe received an invitation, so—”

“Oh, so that’s what they call ‘filling a quota.’”

The girl sitting beside her maliciously laughed at Emily’s snarky comment.

“C’mon, Emily, stop. You have to be kinder with your words, or you’ll put too much pressure on her.”

This girl with light-brown hair must be Riko Suzumi-san. She also belongs to Moon’s Dream, just like Emily-san. I remember she played the role of the illegitimate child of an unfaithful husband in a daytime drama during the fall of last year. She was another famous child actress in the room. She looked quite mature for someone around the same age as Akane. Her extravagant makeup was relatively intimidating.

“Ah, I heard about it; it’s something akin to a ‘pity spot.’”

Riko maliciously chuckled, making sure Akane could see it.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I had heard about it before, so the words kinda escaped my mouth.”

What am I supposed to do in this situation? Akane pulled a fake but nervous smile.

“He-he…”

I’m nowhere near as accomplished as they are, nor do I have their striking looks. There

isn't any justification beyond filling a quota for me to be here. I don't get to feel angry or sad.

All I have to do today is fill my spot and avoid getting in the way of anyone else. Akane thought while taking her seat, only to then be surprised by the sound of the door opening behind her.

"Eh?" the participants gasped, their eyes astonished. Everyone attentively looked at something behind her.

"Wait, is that…?"

Akane, swayed by the moment, peeked over her shoulder and saw a small female figure.

The moment she recognized the girl's face, her heart skipped a beat.

She had a tiny stature, remarkably big eyes, a ribbon, and a soft dress decorated with frills, all paired with her trademarks, a bob cut and beret.

"K-Kana-chan…"

Akane could never mistake that lovely face. The girl was none other than Kana-chan—Kana Arima.

Kana Arima's decision to take part in the audition was fairly recent.

That day, in the living room, she was petrified. Right in front of her, her mom frowned with the intimidating stare of a god of wrath, boiling with anger.

"So, Kana-chan! Have you thought about what you've done?"

Her voice, embedded in fury, reverberated across the house.

"Just why? Why can't you understand no matter how many times I explain?"

No matter how many times you say it, I can't understand something illogical.

What did I do wrong this time? Why is Mom angry at me? Why can't she understand that I can't understand? Those questions whirled around Kana's head. But she knew from experience that saying them out loud would only make things worse; therefore, she kept them for herself.

It didn't use to be like this. Mom was so much kinder.

Kana suppressed her emotions deep down and apologized: “I’m sorry.”
“Sorry that things with the agency turned out like that… I’m really sorry.”
“Apologizing is not enough! This keeps happening because you don’t listen to what I say!”
Mom lashed out, grabbing the telephone on top of the table and unloading her anger on it by throwing the device against the wall, cracking it and producing a terrifying sound.
Yet another broken telephone. Kana stared at the crack and sighed.
Mom had the habit of thrashing the telephone during her hysterical attacks. Perhaps she had become addicted to the sensation of taking it out of the socket.
This was already the fourth time in the year that Kana was getting scolded by her.
The first was when she was dropped from a children's cooking program after five years.
The second was when they received the news that Kana’s new song, which had been released last month, failed to hit the top 50 of music charts.
The third was when a thread titled “Kana Arima is washed” was posted on an online forum.
And now, the fourth was the result of a letter from Kana’s talent agency.

[We regret to inform you that our office has decided not to renew Kana Arima-sama’s contract (Contract Number: XXXXX).
After careful deliberation, we have come to the conclusion that your goals and this office's goals do not align. We are deeply grateful for all your service until now and pray for your success in future endeavors.]

In other words, the agency was saying, “Kana Arima is not a good fit for our company. So we’re dismissing her.”
A child actor’s agency, naturally, deals with child actors, and most of them peak around seven years of age. So, rescinding the contract of one who was almost in middle school, like Kana, was a completely predictable outcome.
But, needless to say, the notice made Mom, proud as she was, feel her blood boil.
“Kana-chan doesn’t work hard! That’s what the agency is saying! Even I don’t see you trying! Why do you throw all my efforts in the garbage? Do you have any idea how much

of my life I've sacrificed just for you?"

Mom threw the envelope with the letter at Kana.

It's not like a paper thrown in the face would hurt. Even being pushed away was something she could bear. However, the words would cut through her heart, leaving behind a deep scar that caused lingering and excruciating pain.

"Hey, Kana-chan, do you really want to make your mom suffer even more? If not, start taking this seriously."

I didn't mean to hurt you, Mom. Even if Kana said this, it would fall on deaf ears.

After all, Kana wanted to get better. She persistently gave her heart and soul, all to give Mom joy.

However, the world is cruel. Really cruel. Kana had come to realize that, no matter how hard she worked, nobody would recognize her efforts.

Surely, Kana Arima, for a time, was a popular child actress. Praised for her angelic appearance and genius acting talent, the invincible "Kana-chan."

From the bottom of her heart, Kana loved her mom from those days, always smiling, always cheering for her.

But this was from when her age was still in the single digits. Around the time she enrolled in elementary school, she stopped starring in dramas. As she turned ten, she stopped getting called for prime-time programming and, of course, even the two-hour specials.

Her household name, "The Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat," was a thing of the past. The public had no interest in a child star past her prime.

As Kana's fame declined, Mom changed.

"Haven't you been getting too lazy recently?"

"Are you really working to death? The other girls seem to be doing that."

"You're tired from practice? Stop being so spineless. I heard top talents can go three straight days without sleeping."

As Kana's revenue dwindled month after month, the nitpicks increased.

Each one of these words was like a profound cut to the body. *I want to make my beloved mom happy. Why don't things go smoothly?* Desperation and confusion began to tighten around her young heart.

Consequently, Kana would fiercely latch on to any job opportunity that came her way. She took on variety shows, music, modeling for children's clothing, voice acting, and even things like cooking programs and radio hosting. Kana would accept any proposal from her agency, setting aside her image. Kana Arima was no longer an actress but a multipurpose entertainer.

However, she faded into obscurity as a result. Multipurpose may sound good, but ultimately, she had stretched herself too thin. Blindly taking a huge number of jobs didn't necessarily translate to instant success.

No matter what she did, the glorious and successful "Kana-chan" days would not come back.

On the contrary, a half-baked attempt at trying so many activities drew criticism: "What even are Kana Arima's goals now? I guess her mind is no longer into acting."

Even the few fans who sincerely treasured her acting skills, not caring about popularity, one by one, lost hope.

In reaction, the agency's judgment was merciless. The reasoning behind the letter was clear. "Kana Arima no longer has any appeal with the public; keeping her is a bad investment."

That assumption was frustrating to her. *I didn't lose my appeal. I can still do so much more.*

However, her mom's feelings towards the dismissal went beyond "frustration." She felt humiliated.

Mom looked at Kana and harshly reprimanded her for being inept.

"This is all because you keep slacking off. Stop embarrassing your mom, would you?"

Kana had no response.

That's right. It's all my fault; simple as that. All because I am a bad girl who embarrassed Mom.

Kana's eyes started to weep, but she quickly suppressed it.

Hence, Kana played the good girl. She put on the "not crying" act.

"Why did it turn out this way?" Mom touched Kana's nose and began to grumble with loathing.

"I'm sorry you were born with one like this. You took it after your father."

According to Mom, Kana's nose, in particular, resembled the nose of Kana's father. He was a workaholic. Kana's impression of him was mostly of a trader who traveled around the world and barely showed up at home. He seemingly left his family for another woman.

Mom stared at the floor, muttering.

"And I gave up on my life to have you."

It was common for her to say this every time her frustration with Kana reached a boiling point. Hidden inside these words lay the thought "I shouldn't have had you." Kana felt a sharp blade piercing her every time she heard it.

Apparently, Mom aspired to enter show business when she was younger. Back then, she saw an opportunity to fulfill her dream after being chosen as Miss Campus in college and appearing in some magazines as an amateur model.

However, she reached a crossroads when she got pregnant with the man she was dating at the time. The idea of marrying, giving birth, and raising a child made her goals look distant, leading her to question whether she should pursue her dream or have a child with a man who had a bigger income than her. After facing this dilemma, Mom gave up her dream and decided to give birth to Kana.

Hearing this story was uncomfortable for Kana. Had she not been born, Mom wouldn't have needed to throw away her aspirations.

"Kana-chan, Mom trusts you to carry out her dream, do you get it?"

Every time she was asked this question, Kana could do nothing but nod in agreement.

"Mom, I'm sorry; I'll work harder next time."

Enduring the pain in her chest, Kana forcibly lifted the corners of her mouth, persisting in telling herself. *Don't cry. It's worse for Mom than it is for me.*

The 12-year-old Kana continued to devote herself to the "good girl" act.

Every day, I pray that dawn doesn't arrive, just so that this peaceful night can last forever.

Once the night came, Kana checked the living room to see if the lights were turned off,

a sign Mom had gone to bed. Her heart could finally rest, so she began to murmur, reassuring herself, curbing the squeezing ache in her chest.

In the end, she couldn't sleep a wink.

What can I do for Mom to feel happy again? What can I do to please her? Those thoughts cluttered her mind.

The next day, Kana nervously entered the living room, where a surprise awaited her.

"Oh my, Kana-chan, good morning."

In total contrast to yesterday, Mom was in a good mood, wearing a brand-new apron, and smiling as bright as a sunflower in the summer. A smell of baked bread coming from the kitchen filled the air. On top of the table, well-roasted bacon, soft scrambled eggs, and a colorful salad were all lined up.

Mom wasn't the type to cook often. Usually, their meals were either bought at the supermarket or through delivery services.

What happened for Mom to be cooking this early? Kana was puzzled while approaching the table. Then, her mom beamed looking at her.

"Mom heard some excellent news."

"Excellent news?"

"Yes. Especially for you, Kana-chan."

I have a bad feeling about this.

Mom pointed to her smartphone's screen; a pleased expression was visible on her face. The screen showed an e-mail with the subject [Regarding the audition for the heroine of Shuugo Nijino's next play.]

"Shuugo Nijino…"

Even Kana had heard that name before. A peculiar individual with the reputation of a wizard director. Being chosen by him was a guarantee of success in the industry. According to the e-mail, this audition was for his new play. The information was exclusive to those involved, making clear it was invite-only.

Where did Mom get this? While Kana tilted her head, Mom puffed her chest out with pride.

"I heard it from a stage director I know."

Mom has long found pleasure in building connections inside the industry. She jumped at

the opportunities Kana's jobs presented to offer her business card. Perhaps this was her way of enjoying the world of show business she always dreamed about.
She ended up getting on the bad side of most people and was completely avoided, yet she managed to get some notable contacts. The "stage director that I know" she mentioned could only be one person.
"If you star in this play by Shuugo Nijino, you'll get popular for sure. And the agency will reconsider their decision."
"But, Mom." Kana carefully chose her words while peeking at her mother's face. "This director is incredibly famous; it's not like anyone could go to this audition."
Mom replied, smiling, "It's fine. You are the 'Kana-chan,' after all. The number one child actress in Japan. Have some faith. I'm sure they'll at least let you take the audition."
Things are not that simple, Mom. Kana exclaimed in her head. *Mom is detached from reality. I'm nowhere near as popular as she thinks. I'm way past my prime.*
"If you have any worries, just let Mom have a word with this director, Nijino. He'll let you take it."
"No, that won't be necessary."
Kana shook her head. *This is my problem. I can't give Mom any more trouble.*
"I'll take it. I'm winning this audition."
Kana asserted. Bringing a smile to Mom's expression.
"I see you're confident. That's good to hear."
"Yes, don't worry."
She was freaking out inside, holding back a cold sweat. Forget passing; it was unlikely for them to even let her participate. It was impossible.
However, rejecting Mom's idea was not a choice.
She could be in good humor, but if Kana were to express any objection, she would probably get agitated again, something Kana wished to avoid for the time being.
At least, if she managed to pass, Mom's temper would surely improve.
Kana paid careful attention to the smartphone's screen, carving the necessary information in her head.
I need to take this into my own hands, because nobody will lend me one.

The third Sunday of February finally arrived. Shuugo Nijino's audition was set to happen in the Setagaya Theater Hall.

Kana, for the first time in a while, fired herself up and headed towards the venue. However, she had a problem, one that she had seen coming: she was bluntly stopped on her way to the elevator.

"I already said you can't."

Blocking the entrance was a man in his 30s, wearing frameless glasses on top of his messy hair, as well as a jacket with "staff member" written on it. He had probably been hired by Shuugo Nijino for this audition.

"Only the girls who received an invitation from Nijino-san can participate. And from what I can see, you have none."

Kana's face got redder under his intimidating glare. "Get out. You weren't invited." — That's how his words felt.

Yet, she managed to endure it; backing down was not an option. She swallowed the frustration that filled her chest and wore a calm facade, letting go of shame.

"You need to let me take this audition. Just allow me to enter. I'll explain everything to Nijino-san later."

"You think I'll let you enter with just that?"

The staff member shook his head, annoyed.

However, Kana couldn't give up there. She absolutely needed to be in that play, for Mom, for herself. She had to make the beloved "Kana-chan" rise again.

"I swear I'm a better actress than anyone there. You won't regret it."

Kana kept her crafty forged smile, which she could pull without any effort. Her cold sweat was kept under control in her clenched hands.

The staff member slightly flinched. *My acting is not something you can just shrug off.* Kana felt motivated by his reaction. *If I keep pressing, he'll likely let me see Shuugo Nijino.*

When hope started to appear, a middle-aged staff member, unable to ignore the

commotion, barged into the scene.
“What’s up with all this noise?”
“Well… It’s this girl; she keeps insisting on taking the audition and meeting Nijino-san.”
The middle-aged man let out a deep sigh and began to stare at Kana’s face with a puzzled look.
“Hey, you. I've seen you before; you're that girl who was all over TV a few years ago. What was the name again?”
The staff member seemed able to recognize her face but not recall her name. It was humiliating.
Kana suppressed her boiling frustration and answered, “It’s Kana Arima.”
“Oh yeah, that’s it, Kana Arima.”
The staff member nodded after finally remembering.
Could it be that the name Kana Arima has become a thing of the past even among theater folks? The mere thought was painful to her.
“Listen, you won’t get anywhere acting selfish like this.”
The staff member scratched the back of his head and said in an exhausted tone.
“I will put this as nicely as I can, but you and your mom have the reputation of being a pain in the ass, always acting egocentric and showing no consideration for staff members. A lot of people in the theater community straight up refuse to work with you.”
Kana bit her lips, trying to bear the harsh words aimed at her.
“The main reason is your attitude.”
Kana obviously knew about her reputation as a black sheep in the industry. This audition was far from being the first time she hadn’t been invited to something.
And she was acutely aware of the reason.
During the height of her popularity, Kana behaved extremely selfishly. She would belittle a director straight to their face, saying, “Your movie is boring,” and treat the assistant director like her servant, making them buy her snacks and other things. She did whatever she wanted.
However, at that time, Kana didn’t consider her actions to be wrong in the slightest. From her perspective, her arrogant attitude was just natural, given her status.
Her mom would tell her she needed to act as a grown-up actress as a way of avoiding

being looked down on by others.

That's right, I'm a genius child actress fawned upon by everyone. They know their place, so I can do whatever I want. That was her way of thinking.

Luckily, two encounters would lead Kana to challenge this view.

The first was when she met a certain child actor. That boy displayed a haunting performance in his first movie despite being younger than Kana. *That boy is the one who really deserves to be called a genius.* Thanks to him, Kana threw away the conceited thought that she herself was one.

The second was when she met the director of that same movie, Taishi Gotanda. He warned the arrogant Kana, "Treat those around you better if you want to last in this industry."

That was when Kana, still a young child, finally realized her arrogant behavior towards other people wasn't a good thing.

Looking at it now, Kana's conduct at the time was plain harassment. The world couldn't care less about excuses like "I didn't know better" or "I was just a child." This industry sells and is run by appearances.

From that point on, Kana began to work on changing her treatment of others. She would pay attention to the reactions around her, read the room, and then do everything in her power to nicely fit in.

However, it was already too late.

For show business, getting rid of a bad reputation is like washing an oil stain. No matter how much you clean it or rub it, it doesn't go away. The difference is, there is no bleach for the real world.

The image of Kana the staff member had in his mind was precisely that: rude and without any manners. He moved his hand as if he was pushing away an insect.

"Anyway, go home. I don't want you causing any trouble to the participants or Nijino-san."

"I can't do that. Please."

Mom is waiting at home after entrusting her dreams to me. I can't go back with empty hands.

Kana took one step forward and raised her head.

He frowned.
“Hey, get away.”
“Please, let me take the audition. Just let me in.”
Kana knelt in front of him and then bowed until both her head and hands touched the ground.
“Eh?” the staff members reacted in astonishment.
“W-What’re you doing?”
“If I’m chosen for the main role, I promise to deliver a performance that will bring massive audiences. So, please, let me do it!”
The staff members were left utterly speechless.
A 12-year-old girl, the infamous Kana Arima no less, was kneeling on the ground, begging. They had no idea how to react.
At that moment, an applause was heard from a distance.
“Very well. This seems interesting.”
Kana raised her head and directed her attention to the source of the applause. Sitting on a sofa beside the elevator, she could see an old gentleman.
He possessed sharp eyes, a mustache, as well as salt-and-pepper hair. All of that combined with a slender figure, reminiscent of a withered tree.
“Who would have imagined that Kana Arima would throw away her pride to this extent? I might let you participate out of respect for such determination.”
The gentleman stood up and slowly walked towards Kana. Due to an impairment in his left leg, he walked with a cane, leaning his right side on it.
The staff members looked at the man, surprised.
“But, Nijino-san—”
“The number of participants is seven; I don’t mind increasing it to eight.”
That elderly man, Shuugo Nijino, faintly smiled.
Kana finally realized who the man standing in front of her was.
Nijino looked at Kana and said, “Please, stand up.” She did so.
After clearing his throat, he began talking.
“Kana Arima-san, do you wish to be in my audition no matter what?”
“Yes.”

“The winner of this audition will be decided not based on their acting career, but on merit. Do you understand that?”

“Of course,” Kana nodded, full of resolve. “That’s why I came here, to get the lead role through my skills.”

Nijino nodded, delighted. He then began to firmly look at Kana's face and tenderly said, “I like the look in your eyes.”

“You seem different from when you were drunk on your talent. I like this hunger.”

Kana bowed her head, saying, “T-Thanks…” Was that even something praiseworthy?

“Then, we shall meet again in the venue. I’ll be expecting a killer performance.”

Nijino suddenly laughed and turned his back.

Looking at him from behind as he walked away, Kana slowly let out a sigh of relief.

So that was the wizard director, Shuugo Nijino. He’s calmer than I expected. What is he hiding behind that faint smile?

I need to be cautious.—Kana tightly braced herself.

Chapter 2

The girl who had just entered the audition waiting room was Kana Arima—Kana-chan.
Akane stared, stunned. Kana-chan frowned in response, “What?”
“Got a problem? Who are you?”
It was as if they'd never met. Akane panicked under Kana’s unflinching stare.
Could it be…? Akane wondered. *Has Kana-chan forgotten about me or even not recognized me?*
Even if she wanted to, Akane couldn't shake the memory of that moment. To this day, she would occasionally relive it in her nightmares. However, the same wasn’t true for Kana-chan. For her, it was probably an insignificant encounter that was quick to disappear in her memory.
Honestly, I should’ve seen that coming.
By this point, it had already been a few years. At that time, Kana-chan fans were in the thousands, maybe dozens of thousands, across the nation. Among them, Akane was just another nameless follower in the crowd, someone that would naturally be forgotten after a mere happenstance.
Besides, Akane’s current look was significantly different. From the day Kana-chan told her, “Stop imitating me,” Akane worked on changing her appearance as much as she could. She abandoned the bob cut for long hair, stretching down to her back, and also ditched the cutesy clothes, opting for a chic blouse and long skirt.
By de-Kanafying herself, she now seemed an entirely different person.
So, Akane, looking to start a conversation, approached Kana-chan as if they were strangers.
“N-Nice to meet you, Kana-chan. I’m Akane Kuro—”
“Sorry.” Kana-chan cut her off.
“Look, I have no interest in becoming buddies with other actresses.”
With that, Kana-chan walked to a folding chair and sat down abruptly as if nothing had happened. Her eyes focused on her phone, with a sullen and stern expression. It was

difficult to tell whether she was angry or not. But that smile, which once shone on TV, was nowhere to be seen.

Akane sighed and sat down on one of the empty chairs.

I'm a little worried. I could've never expected to meet Kana-chan again.

I can feel the memories from that day coming back, together with that same knot in my chest. I don't know if I can do the audition like this.

All eyes in the room were on Kana-chan. Whispers like "It's that girl" and "The genius actress who can cry in ten seconds flat" circulated.

Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi were no exception, chatting while stealing glances at her.

Emily greeted Kana-chan with a radiant smile, "Hello."

"You are Kana Arima, correct? Nice to meet you. I'm Emily Takafuji. I loved your performance in *Decaying Family.*"

Akane was speechless at such blatant flattery, a stark contrast to how she had been treated. *So that's what people call a cloying voice.*

"Totally!" Riko Suzumi followed up, equally phony.

"Not to mention *Pepper Workout,* you were adorable in that. I'd constantly watch and sing along."

"Oh, is that so?" Kana-chan replied with an indifferent expression.

"Well, it's all meaningless now."

"M-Meaningless?"

Emily's eyes widened. Her careful attempt at flattery had been coldly rejected.

"Sorry," Kana-chan said, taking a glance at Emily.

"I'm trying to focus here. You two should do the same."

Faced with Kana-chan's cold shoulder, Emily and Riko begrudgingly retreated, murmuring, "Who does she think she is?" "Talk about arrogant."

"And I took the time to talk to her."

"No wonder she isn't called for anything anymore; that crying act is her only trick."

Emily and Riko continued their insults, so loud that even Kana-chan could hear. Her indifference seemed to really get under their skin.

By contrast, Kana-chan's face hadn't moved a bit. She kept the same sour look while

staring at her phone the entire time she was in the room. Calm and collected, she likely dismissed their words as insignificant buzzing.
Just like I remember. Akane thought. Kana-chan's mental fortitude was a source of admiration and something she wished to learn from.
Also, Kana-chan's acting isn't limited to her crying. It's not even her trump card. Have they even bothered to watch her performances? Akane wondered, bewildered.

Ten minutes after Kana-chan had entered the room, a woman in her 20s opened the door and bowed her head, saying, "Excuse me."
"Everyone, we're deeply grateful for you taking the time to participate in this audition hosted by Nijino."
Emily and Riko stopped their chatting and switched to a serious expression towards the staff member. It didn't even look like they were bad-mouthing Kana-chan a moment ago. As popular child actresses on the rise, acting serious was a piece of cake.
"I'll be distributing the script for the audition."
The staff member began handing out a booklet for each participant.
Akane started to flip through the pages right after grabbing it. The script was brief, about ten stapled pages, suggesting a play of roughly three minutes.
Titled *The Quarrel*, the play only had two characters, Husband and Wife. A rough reading revealed the story to be about an argument between the two characters in their living room.
That's weird. Akane thought. *From what I remember, Nijino Shuugo's next play would be about a young girl in her early teens. Yet, the only characters here are Husband and Wife.*
What's happening? Why would they have us audition for a young girl's role by performing as an adult couple?
Could it be… Akane pondered. *Perhaps this isn't a standard audition. There may be a purpose to this odd approach.*
What does the organizer plan to extract from the participants with this story?

“Please take 30 minutes to familiarize yourselves with the script. Afterward, you will be taken to the hall to perform.”
“Excuse me,” Emily Takafuji said after raising her hand.
“This script has the roles of Husband and Wife. Will we get to choose between the roles?”
“I am sorry. I cannot answer this question.”
“Uh?” Emily’s eyes widened at the blunt statement; the other participants followed in equal disbelief.
The staff member simply stated, “These are Nijino’s instructions,” and left the room.
I see. Akane reached a conclusion. *Director Nijino Shuugo is known for being unorthodox. So, this must be his way of testing us.*
Perhaps the audition is designed so that roles will be assigned at random. As a result, we would be forced to become familiar with both roles. Anyone who memorizes only one of them will likely fail.
The type of actress who he’s looking for might be one who can get a solid grasp of the script as a whole, instead of just her own lines.
A slight glance at Kana-chan showed she already was deeply focused on the script. Her lips moved as she quietly recited every single line.
I need to work hard too. Akane turned her eyes to the script.
Starting with the Husband’s perspective, followed by the Wife’s perspective, Akane immersed herself in the dialogue, carefully getting the feel of each line, and began building a mental image of both.
She carefully laid a foundation so that it would not matter whether she was given the role of the Husband or the Wife.
But, thirty minutes later, Akane was in for a shock.
The role assigned to them was neither of those.

Akane was engrossed in the script.
Time passes surprisingly quickly when one is focused; no wonder, then, those 30

minutes for reading went by in the blink of an eye.
Then, the staff member returned to the room and guided Akane and the other participants to the place of the audition, a theater hall on a lower floor of the building. The hall was the smallest one in the building, its seating capacity below 300. It was well-made and sturdy, with brand-new columns and flooring. Even to an untrained eye, the carefully designed lighting and sound were apparent. It seemed almost too elaborate for a mere audition.
Looking at the stage, there were a man and a woman in their 40s. The man, wearing a turtleneck sweater, was slim and tall. The woman, wearing an apron, had a gentle smile. Both of them seemed familiar.
Akane heard Kana-chan gasping right behind her.
“Wait, are they Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura?”
Upon hearing their names, Akane also remembered that both of them were prominent figures in movies and dramas.
Junichi Misawa, a popular actor, achieved nationwide fame for his long-standing role as the protagonist's partner in a detective drama. His alluring features were popular among women.
Meanwhile, Nanako Nakamura, who started as a model, had won the Best Actress award a decade prior for her leading role in *Memories of the Lily.*
To Akane, they were veteran actors in a wholly different league from herself.
Why were such renowned actors on stage? As Akane pondered this, the staff member addressed the participants.
“These are Misawa-san and Nakamura-san, you will be acting together with them for this audition. Misawa will play the role of Husband and Nanako the role of Wife.”
“Eh?” Emily’s eyes widened.
“That’s quite a lavish casting for just an audition.”
“Shuugo Nijino really lives up to his reputation.”
Emily Takafuji let out a sigh of wonderment.
Akane shared the same sentiment. However, the thought of performing with such seasoned actors also filled her with dread.
So, if I pick the role of Wife, I’ll perform with Junichi Misawa, and if I pick the role of

Husband, it'll be with Nanako Nakamura. That's probably the case here.
Nevertheless, the staff member's next words would shatter that expectation.
"The role you will be assigned is Atmosphere. You will get up on the stage with Misawa-san and Nakamura-san, and then perform the role of Atmosphere as part of *The Quarrel* play."
Akane couldn't believe her ears. *Atmosphere? That's our role. What does that even mean?*
The other participants were in equal disarray. They would look at each other, puzzled, while saying, "What does she mean by Atmosphere?" "This isn't in the script." "What exactly are we supposed to do?"
At that moment, a small laugh could be heard coming from the hall seats. The source was a slender gentleman with grizzled hair sitting in the central area.
It was the director, Shuugo Nijino. Akane could easily recognize his face from theater magazines.
Coming up with an unpredictable task like that, no wonder they call him a wizard. And he seems to be enjoying the confusion among the participants.
Meanwhile, Kana-chan, in contrast to the rest, didn't show any worry. She briefly nodded and said.
"Atmosphere, uh… Alright."
Kana-chan, drawing on her years of experience, appeared to have some notion of what to do.
"Attention, everyone," the staff member began to call the participants.
"I will be informing the order of performances. First, Rin Nagareyama-san. Second, Emily Takafuji-san. Third, Akane Kurokawa-san."
Hearing her name called, Akane's heart skipped a beat. Third was sooner than she anticipated; she wasn't sure if she could figure out her performance in time.
"*Atmosphere." What am I even supposed to do?*

Two weeks ago, shortly after concluding one of his performances for the *Lala Lai*

Theatrical Company, Taiki received an email.

[Subject: Request to be an examiner for an audition.
Taiki Himekawa,
We apologize for the sudden message. We will be holding an audition for our next play and would be delighted to welcome you as an examiner.
Your vast experience and superb acting ability may serve as a valuable guide for the participants. Furthermore, your perspective will surely lead us to making a better decision.
Further details regarding the audition may be found below.]

“What a pain,” was Taiki’s first impression of the e-mail. First things first, Taiki was still in middle school. He was busy enough dealing with school and acting work (although it’s not like he actually put much effort into the former).
I’ll just ignore and delete it, I guess. Taiki thought. As his finger moved towards the button, his eyes caught the sender's name: “Director Nijino Shuugo.”
Nijino was a familiar name for Taiki. Two years ago, he had starred in one of the plays directed by him, *The Piano of Shadows,* a story about a distressed young pianist, performed by Taiki.
It was praised by critics, and even Taiki found himself surprised by his performance. His acting range had, it seemed, unconsciously broadened.
For that reason, Taiki felt a certain gratitude towards Nijino as a director.
How lucky! Just some adjustments and my schedule is open. I don’t get what he sees in me to give me the position, but I guess it’ll be interesting to watch at least half of it. Taiki had a profound interest in watching performances of talented individuals, regardless of age.
Might as well go; Maybe I get to see some fire performances.
With this thought in mind, Taiki replied to the email, “I’ll be there if I manage to wake up.”

When the day arrived, Taiki took the Den-en-toshi Line in the morning, dropped at the station in front of the designated building, and headed towards the hall inside of it. Upon entering, he saw Nijino Shuugo waving to him from one of the seats.

“Oh, Himekawa-kun, thank you for coming.”

“Thanks.” Taiki slightly bowed and approached the audience section. “Here, take a seat,” Nijino urged him. Taiki calmly sat down by his side.

Nijino directed an affable smile towards him, saying, “My apologies for inviting you amidst your busy schedule.”

“No, it’s fine. I was free anyway.”

“Sure…” Nijino replied, twirling his mustache.

“You’re quite busy from what I’ve heard. Although that’s hardly surprising considering you’re the most promising young rising star right now.”

“Sure, I guess.” Taiki replied, slightly confused. This reaction was not born of humility; Taiki simply had no interest in external appraisals.

In his mind, he was simply a theater person. He entered the stage because he enjoyed it. Praise or awards didn’t stir any strong emotions in him.

Nijino was completely aware of this side of Taiki’s personality. “That’s very much a Himekawa-kun response.” He remarked with a slight shrug.

“I heard you got the main role in director Masanori Shima’s new movie. That’s surprising considering that *Lala Lai’s* plays alone can be quite a toll during this season.”

“Well, about that… I take some time to relax; otherwise I get tired.”

Never push yourself too much. That was Taiki’s motto.

When he was five years old, Taiki lost both of his parents in a particularly shocking double suicide. His approach to life stemmed from the mental health struggles he endured after that event.

He bottled his traumatic past, isolating it from his life.

Have fun whenever something fun happens. That’s all I need in life.

He applied the same mentality to his rehearsals. Keeping them enjoyable often led to surprisingly better performances.

“But…” Taiki questioned.

“Am I fit for this? I’ve never worked as an examiner for an audition before. Like, I’m still

a middle schooler."
"Of course. In fact, I believe your fresh perspective is precisely what we need."
According to the email, the current audition had as its objective selecting a child actress in her early teens for the role of heroine in Nijino's new play.
"Also…" Nijino let out a mischievous smile, more fitting of a prankster boy than a man his age. "I'm sure at least one presentation will pique your interest. We got a fascinating girl this time."
"Well, hmm…" Taiki looked around.
"Aren't there any other examiners besides me?"
"Yes, you and I alone will be the judges. Too many people would just turn into convoluted noise."
"Ah," Taiki was taken aback. "That's quite a lot of responsibility."
"It's nothing you have to worry about; just say whatever comes to your mind. The best feedback is the one that gets straight to the point."
"Well, that's reassuring."
"Anyway, please enjoy it as if you were just a spectator."
Nijino directed his eyes to the stage, where the props and scenery were already set up. A sofa and a dining table had been brought; a cabinet, a kitchen, and an air conditioner complemented the background, suggesting that the following audition would take place in a living room.
Then, from the stage wings, two distinguished actors, slated to play supporting roles, emerged.
Junichi Misawa was resting on the sofa with a stern look. Meanwhile, Nanako Nakamura, wearing an apron, was standing in front of the kitchen, behind Misawa. Following the script, they, playing the roles of Husband and Wife, were about to start an argument.
"Damn." Taiki spontaneously sighed in surprise.
"You didn't need to go out of your way to call such big shots. So, why?"
"We've known each other for a while. I asked them, and they were more than happy to help out."
Nijino talked as if it was no big deal. But Taiki knew how impressive that was.

Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura were famous actors whose schedules were, without a doubt, incredibly tight.

“They have more spare time than people think. But, yes. This is fun.”

“If I were a girl, I could even give it a try.” Taiki laughed.

Then, he proceeded to flip through the script Nijino had handed to him.

The participants of this audition were set to play the role of Atmosphere on the same stage those two would argue.

“By the way, what’s this Atmosphere role?”

Nijino let out a small grin in reaction to Taiki’s question.

“Well, who knows?”

“Is—is this a riddle?”

“I haven’t decided on any exact response to this question. The actresses are free to come up with their own interpretations of it.”

This guy is cruel. Taiki thought. Had he been in the actresses’ position, he would probably be yelling, “To hell with that.”

Essentially, the audition was testing not only acting skills but also their ability to interpret and express the script. It wasn't just about acting; he was also assessing their potential as writers and directors.

Taiki was acutely aware this was no easy feat.

As an actor, the most challenging command he could get was “Do as you please.” Acting in a play without a screenwriter or director is like sailing across the ocean without a map or compass. At best, you'd end up shipwrecked or adrift.

“In any case, all they need to do is make this play interesting, nothing more.”

“An interesting play, uh?”

This guy is a sadist. Taiki thought. Shuugo Nijino is the most prominent director in Japan. Expecting someone to entertain him was an exorbitant demand. Having previously performed in one of his plays, where he was exhaustively instructed, Taiki firmly understood the difficulty of the task.

“There aren’t any girls with the skills to pull this off.”

“If there aren’t, tough luck. I’ll just need to hold another audition and keep searching.”

“But you know…” Nijino leaned back, his eyes shining with childlike excitement as he

stared at the stage.
“I have a feeling that this time, she’ll come.”
“That would be great.” Taiki turned his attention to the stage.
Well, I'll watch it, but I won't get my hopes up. If there’s such a girl capable of entertaining Nijino, then she’s unquestionably a genius.
The kind of genius you only find a handful of in the world.

“Why? Tell me why you always come home late!”
“Because I’m busy with work. Give me a break.”
“Always with that work excuse. You just dump all the housework on me so you can go out with other women!”
Taiki remained silent, paying close attention to the stage. There, Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura cursed at each other, visibly red. The unfaithful Husband and the Wife, who came to doubt his every move, clashed, and both actors perfectly conveyed the explosive situation.
They're veterans for a reason. The realism they bring to the argument immediately immerses you in the story. If this were open to the public, that performance alone would be worth the ticket.
In contrast, the participant was lightly dancing at the edge of the stage.
According to the documents, that seems to be Emily Takafuji, 13 years old. She belongs to the juvenile theater troupe Moon’s Dream. She appears to be a well-raised, beautiful girl with a streamlined face. Come to think of it, I think I saw her in some dramas and commercials recently.
Emily Takafuji, separate from the argument between the two veterans, lightly moved on stage as if she were dancing. Beneath the air conditioner, she would sometimes spread her arms and sway from side to side.
What’s she doing? Taiki was puzzled. Nijino nodded, intrigued. “Hmm.”
“Maybe she’s portraying the wind coming from the air conditioner.”

“Wind…? Ah, so, the moving atmosphere.”
“That’s one way of interpreting it. Kids have such peculiar imaginations.”
“Ha-ha,” Nijino chuckled softly, a faint grin on his face, as he stared intently at Emily Takafuji's performance.
“I don’t quite get it, but….” Taiki nodded. “She decided to approach the Atmosphere task with a straightforward response.”
“Yes, it’s night and day compared to the first girl.”
Though, that comes out as a bit harsh. Nijino thought while chuckling.
The girl who preceded Emily Takafuji, the very first girl to perform, put on a much more pathetic display. It seems she simply walked onto the stage and did nothing. From beginning to end, without uttering any line or making any movement, she merely stood there.
That girl’s way of portraying the Atmosphere, it seems, was to make her presence vanish and become one with it.
Well, such a cop-out was understandable. Atmosphere was a tough role to grasp. And of all possible choices, “Do nothing” was the easiest, most uninspired choice.
However, in that case, what’s the point of being on stage as an actor? An actor’s job is to convey something on the stage. That is what they are paid for. If they can’t express anything, then they are useless.
Looking from that perspective, you could say that Emily Takafuji, by moving her body to portray “the wind coming from the air conditioner,” was at least putting up a fight.
“Hmm,” Nijino rested his back on his seat while touching his lips.
“Emily Takafuji is a fairly experienced child actress. She has a knack for captivating audiences.”
“Does she take dancing classes? She seems good at it.”
“In fact, there’s a significant number of staff members who expect her to be selected. After all, in her generation, no one has a more thriving acting career.”
On the stage, the quarrel between Husband and Wife approached its climax.
“Yeah, I’ve got plenty of affairs! But have some sympathy!”
“Sympathy? You have no idea how much I’m going through.”
“So, what do you even want from me?”

Junichi Misawa, playing the role of Husband, shouted. “I’m at my limit!”
Nanako Nakamura, playing the role of Wife, followed with “The same for me” and burst out crying.
“I can’t live like this anymore.”
“Then, I guess it’s better for us to separate.”
“Are you serious?”
The Husband, with cold eyes, stared at the tearful Wife.
Even as the play's tension escalated, Emily Takafuji's Atmosphere performance continued with the same light, unusual, dance-like movements, her expression always unconcerned.
A strange feeling engulfed the play. The violent quarrel between Husband and Wife contrasted sharply with the pretty dance of the Atmosphere. If this were Emily Takafuji’s intended result, then it was something worth considering.
“That’s interesting,” Nijino murmured with admiration.
In the end, Emily Takafuji carried this monotone performance until the end of the play. To continue playing “The wind coming from the air conditioner” like that, without wavering, until the finale, it took some guts. It was possible to at least recognize that.
Maybe this audition will bring some surprises. Taiki thought, clapping for Emily Takafuji's performance.

Kana Arima, together with the other candidates, watched the scene unfold from the audience.
Normally, auditions where candidates could watch each other’s performances weren’t that common. But Shuugo Nijino’s ones were different. By having the participants observe each other's presentations, he likely aimed to foster a more competitive environment.
In fact, Emily Takafuji’s performance just now had left a strong impression on the other participants.
“Incredible! That’s Emily-chan for you!”

“What a lovely dance!”

“Those movements were so good. Maybe I should try to imitate that.”

The girls sitting near Kana were delighted, their eyes sparkling with fascination. Emily Takafuji seemed to have completely enchanted them.

Of course, from Kana’s perspective, that girl was graceful. And her dance was respectable. The idea of portraying the Atmosphere as the floating wind wasn’t bad per se.

However, I have no intention of copying that.

First of all, this is an audition. Merely replicating the previous performance won’t impress the judges. You’d be shooting yourself in the foot.

Furthermore, Kana wasn’t particularly captivated by Emily’s performance.

She had given her all to interpret and convey the meaning of the word *atmosphere* in itself, but that’s it. Emily hadn’t thought about the play as a whole.

That floating wind performance and the auxiliary roles of Husband and Wife were at odds with each other. On one side, a dance; on the other, a quarrel. It created a disjointed play that Kana had no desire to replicate.

When my turn arrives, I’ll compete with a different approach. Yet, was there any other participant who shared the same view as Kana?

Kana glanced towards Akane Kurokawa.

She was fixedly staring in Emily’s direction on the stage. However, a closer look revealed her eyes weren’t focused on Emily at all.

Actually, Akane didn’t seem to be looking at anything. Her face was unmoving and devoid of emotion, like a noh mask, while she continued to murmur single-mindedly.

This girl… she’s really into it. Kana immediately understood Akane’s case. Among actors, there are those who become that focused when watching another performance in front of them, immersing their hearts into the world of the play and fully detaching themselves from reality.

Even to an outsider, Akane's intense focus was clear. You could pinch her cheeks, and she probably wouldn’t notice. *I thought she was just a docile girl, but to have that look on her face, she likely has noticed something as an actress.*

“Alright, show me what you’ve got.”

Kana folded her arms, staring at Akane's expression. She carried a condescending attitude, absolutely confident in herself, almost as if she silently declared, "Go ahead, you're no match for my talent and career."
At that moment, Kana still hadn't realized. But that bashful little girl would go on to become a hurdle in her career, her biggest rival.

Taiki Himekawa began to feel bored.
He watched Emily Takafuji exit the stage, sighing, his eyes only partially open. *Will someone else deliver a better performance? Nah, that better happen. I sacrificed my precious day off to be here.*
A quick glance revealed the third girl already entering the stage to replace Emily.
The female theater director announced her name.
"Akane Kurokawa. Please, come here."
Hearing her name, the girl, Akane Kurokawa, nodded and entered the stage.
She had a slender, willowy figure, dark hair, and sharp eyes. Her attire and posture clearly spoke of good upbringing, and she projected an air of intelligence.
No aspect of her is particularly flashy, but she can shine with some polish. Her mom is probably a beauty. Thinking this, Taiki suddenly realized he was evaluating her as if they were at a mixer. It was the type of thought he always ended up having when in front of a female he felt some attraction towards—a bad habit, inherited from his late father, which he often joked about.
The girl went towards Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura and swiftly bowed. She had a somewhat wooden expression, probably due to nervousness. That appearance was charming in a certain way.
On the other hand, Nijino, right beside him, closely watched Akane Kurokawa with a serious face.
"That girl is from a juvenile theater company that got my interest."
"That got your interest?"
"One that diligently nurtures their child actors. It's called the *Hydrangea Theatrical*

Company."
"Eh?" Taiki nodded.
What level of talent must they have to gain Nijino's interest? At least, I hope this means she'll show something more interesting than what Emily Takafuji just gave.
Just as Taiki thought this, the staff members finished preparing the stage. Nanako Nakamura, the Wife, put her hands on her waist and began to scowl at Junichi Misawa, the Husband.
"Why? Tell me why you always come home late!"
Following the script, the Husband, sitting on the sofa, began to make excuses. However, the moment Nanako Nakamura opened her mouth again, Akane Kurokawa was right beside her.

"You certainly went to that woman's place again, didn't you?"

"Uh?" Taiki frowned. *The role of Atmosphere isn't present in the script. In that case, this line is an ad-lib that Akane Kurokawa added.*
The girl stood beside Nanako Nakamura, mirroring her posture with hands on her waist, and directing an accusatory look towards the Husband.
Akane Kurokawa was imitating the Wife just like a mirror. *What's she doing?* Taiki wondered, watching as Junichi Misawa, the Husband, began his next line, the scene where he throws at the Wife numerous excuses for getting home late.
"Because I'm busy with work. Give me a break."
"Seriously, look at you, starting this again. That's why women are so annoying."
Akane Kurokawa moved behind Junichi Misawa and shrugged her shoulders as if she was tired of the situation. Once again, an ad-lib not present in the script, this time, almost like she was an interpreter for the Husband's hidden emotions.
Akane Kurokawa then returned, standing behind the Wife.
"Always with that work excuse. You just dump all the housework on me so you can go out with other women!"
"Of course. It's so obvious. I can sense the disgusting smell coming from behind you."

Akane Kurokawa, from behind the Wife, scowled at the Husband with a gaze covered in distrust. That face was the embodiment of a wife doubting the fidelity of her husband.
So that's it. Taiki reached a conclusion. Akane Kurokawa was channeling the sentiments of both Husband and Wife. It was as if she were adding novelistic narration to a purely dialogue-based script.
Even Nijino was impressed: "Now, that's magnificent."
"I may have said that there isn't any particular answer to this matter. But… I, in fact, had set one model answer."
"Model answer?"
"I, personally, define *Atmosphere* as the mood of the scene. And this mood consists of the union of the states of mind of the people present in the scene."
"Huh…" Taiki said, looking confused.
"It's a bit complicated to me, but… Is it something like, 'If everyone in the scene is having fun, then the atmosphere is a fun one'?"
Nijino nodded in agreement. "Yeah, just like that."
"To express the atmosphere of *The Quarrel* through acting. What Akane Kurokawa is doing is, essentially, taking this *Atmosphere* and accentuating it."
"Yes, indeed."
Taiki adjusted his glasses and watched Akane Kurokawa on stage. As Husband and Wife took turns on the offensive, she expanded on their innermost thoughts.
"Right now, that girl is expressing in a direct manner how the angry couple feels deep down. So that is the Atmosphere?"
"Even then, being able to play the inner emotions of both sides wasn't in my plans. At best, I hoped that someone would play just one of them."
Nijino, visibly dazzled, continued to stare at Akane Kurokawa's performance.
"Who would have thought a girl able to play both would come?"
What a pleasant miscalculation. Nijino said.
Being a member of a juvenile theater company that caught Nijino's interest was already something. That young girl, Akane Kurokawa, just by reaching this idea for her performance, already showed some skill, but her acting ability itself was also something else. The way she was synchronized with Misawa, as the Husband, and Nakamura, the

Wife, down to their breath, wouldn't make you think it was her first time acting alongside them.

Taiki felt a shiver of excitement run across his body.

That girl is kinda amazing.

Akane Kurokawa had broken down *The Quarrel* play into little, easily understandable pieces. Oddly, Husband and Wife appeared to be having fun, even as they shouted their lines.

"Yeah, I've got plenty of affairs! But have some sympathy!"

And when the Husband raised his voice, Akane Kurokawa instantly mirrored his indignant expression.

"It's not like I go to those hostess bars because I want to. Why can't you understand that? I swear, all women are like this."

Akane Kurokawa, her face contorted in anger, was on the same wavelength as the Husband. The subtly raised eyebrow, the movements of the head, the slightly lower tone of the voice—everything was identical. Despite the age and gender differences, it was like seeing two identical people standing next to each other.

"I see," Taiki murmured. "That girl is remarkable. Both her perception and ability to recreate are outstanding. She's perfectly copying and reenacting the actors right in front of her, down to the expressions and mannerisms, and capturing even the individual nuances of their performances. I sure couldn't pull that off."

"You and she are different types of actors, after all." Nijino murmured, his eyes still fixed on the stage.

"Perceive and recreate, just like you said; that's Akane Kurokawa's talent. Even an adult would struggle to reach such precision, and to achieve it at her age is truly exceptional. She sure isn't your run-of-the-mill actress."

In front of everyone's eyes, the Husband, the Wife, and the Atmosphere, expressing their inner emotions, had pulled together a rather curious play. A simple marital quarrel had become a bizarrely compelling microcosm, which entranced all those present.

She's quite an underdog. I wasn't expecting to meet such a talented person today.

Taiki's face softened into a contented expression.

Kana Arima, seeing Akane Kurokawa on stage, was stupefied.

What is that?

There's a girl that skilled among actors my age, and she still isn't on the industry's radar?

She was sweating out of frustration, her heart throbbing harder and harder, and an impatient, exasperated feeling, bit by bit, spread through her body.

Kana wasn't the only one stunned. The staff members responsible for preparing the theater, the other participants, Emily Takafuji, and everybody else had their attention stolen by Akane Kurokawa's passionate performance.

"She's perfectly playing the Husband and the Wife all by herself."

One of the duties of an actor is "to keep the audience's attention glued to the play," at least, that was what Kana believed.

And she, undoubtedly, felt this ability in Akane Kurokawa. That girl wasn't simply standing out like a sore thumb; instead, she was in natural harmony with both roles.

An alarm bell rang in Kana's head. Her instincts were warning her: Akane Kurokawa was a threat.

Her looks are plain, and her personality doesn't stand out. That's probably the reason she hasn't become popular yet. A common story among child actors.

Of course, she's still got some rough spots. There's a snowball's chance in hell of her beating me.

But she's a genius, without any doubt. I never saw any girl like her before, an actor my age capable of breathing down my neck, with her fangs aiming at my throat, all through sheer effort.

I can't stand the idea of losing to this girl.

From deep inside her chest, she felt one instinct surging. *I can't afford to lose to her. This isn't just for someone else anymore; it's for me.* She thought.

But a half-assed performance won't do against that girl. Kana renewed her resolve and decided, *I'm diving head-on without pulling any brakes.*

Meanwhile, Akane Kurokawa had nothing in her mind but playing the Atmosphere on the stage. She was so absorbed in her acting that she didn't even notice the reactions from the audience.
If the Husband got angry, Akane got angry. If the Wife cried, Akane cried. To convey the emotions of each one, Akane filled the stage with her presence and movements.
Her thoughts were, "The Atmosphere is the 'mood of the play.'"
However, such an idea wasn't of her own design. In her mind, Akane remembered a column she had read in a theater magazine years ago.
The author of that column was none other than Shuugo Nijino. And the title was "The actor who steers the atmosphere of a play."

[As a director who has been involved with countless plays throughout the decades, there is nothing more exciting than encountering an actor capable of steering the atmosphere of a play out of their own volition. Their ability transcends merely reading lines on a script; almost like magic, they can attract the eyes of the audience and immerse them into the world of the story.
Firstly, to be considered an actor who can steer the atmosphere on stage, it is not enough to simply utter their lines in a skillful manner. They must be able to fully immerse themselves in their role. Rather than acting, they must become their roles in such a manner that the audience loses track of what's real and what's fiction. Their breath, eye movements, and changes in facial expressions are all cornerstones in the process of shaping this atmosphere.
Furthermore, it is essential to be in sync with your fellow actors. A play doesn't consist of one person; there is an invisible bond among co-actors. Having the flexibility to change one's acting in accordance with the movements and lines of actors sharing the stage brings further life to the atmosphere of the play.
That moment is when the charm of the performing arts truly shines.]

Essentially, Akane Kurokawa had never forgotten the content of those words she read.

Nijino's column was deeply ingrained in her memory. There, Nijino-san defined *Atmosphere* as the capacity to carry the mood of the entire play.
In that case, it's possible this audition also consists of conveying the mood of the play. Akane concluded.
And there she was, through her lines and movements, presenting the feelings of the roles of her co-actors, Husband and Wife. For Akane, acting was about wearing the mask of someone else; in other words, "to imitate them." And for someone with her inherent gift for imitation, this approach was ideal.
Akane stood behind the Wife and brought her frustration to light.

"Always with the exact same talk, why can't you understand?"

She tightly gripped both of her fists and stomped on the ground, striking an exaggerated pose of anger. Believing this reflected the Wife's inner rage, Akane portrayed it through her acting.
This is really fun. Akane felt. *I never imagined performing in resonance with top-tier actors was so thrilling.*
When she was walking up to the stage, doubts like "What if I mess up?" flashed through her mind. But now, such insecurities had completely vanished.
As long as she was wearing someone's mask, she could forget her own frail heart.
She had almost forgotten with time, but imitating others had always been her greatest joy.
Maybe Okamura-san from *Hydrangea* saw through Akane's emotions, and in order to help her overcome her emotional block, sent her to this audition—*or perhaps I'm overthinking.*
It doesn't matter anyway; now, all I want is to enjoy this play to the end.
That was the sole thought in Akane's mind: to orchestrate the Atmosphere together with Husband and Wife.

"Hey, Nijino-san." Taiki Himekawa began to talk in a low voice.

“What type of roles has that girl been up to?”
“From what I can tell, she hasn’t landed any big ones until now.” Nijino answered. “Apart from *Hydrangea’s* productions, she's only appeared in minor TV roles.”
“That sounds like a huge waste.” Taiki frowned.
“Such a talented girl, buried like that.”
“Nobody has discovered her yet, after all. This is particularly common among child actors. The media tends to favor readily digestible, attention-grabbing mediocrity over prodigies who are truly talented but less flashy.”
“And that’s why auditions sponsored by weirdos like you are necessary.”
“Well, you could say that.”
Although weirdo is a bit too much. Nijino let out a gentle smile.
On stage, the play *The Quarrel* was reaching its climax. The Husband played by Junichi Misawa stared at the Wife with a fed-up face.
“Then, I guess it’s better for us to separate.”
“Are you serious?”
Akane Kurokawa positioned herself between the arguing couple. She folded her arms, took a look at both of their faces, and then, with an arrogant expression, snorted, “Humph.”
“Go ahead, you can’t do anything on your own.”
As such, she acted as an interpreter for both the Husband’s and the Wife’s mental states.
At the heart of their fierce argument lay a shared, conceited thought: “Without me, they’re nothing; they need me.” In essence, her interpretation was that this was a dispute between two similar people.
By expressing this through her role as Atmosphere, she provided a definitive conclusion to the scene.
“Fweee,” Taiki instinctively whistled, amazed.
“Now, that was interesting.”
“Yes, beyond expectations.”
Nijino proceeded to clap his hands with a satisfied smile.
On stage, Akane Kurokawa politely bowed her head in a bit of a hurry. She began to

feel nervous, and her face turned entirely red.
At that moment, she looked nothing more than a slightly shy girl, not the genius who had been delivering such a fantastical performance up until now. *Appearances can be deceiving.* Taiki thought.
“Then, I guess we have a winner.”
“Not yet.” As Taiki expressed his thought, Nijino replied, smiling.
“Let’s not jump to conclusions; we still have to see all the performances. Besides, that interesting girl I mentioned is yet to go on stage.”
“Wait, Kurokawa wasn’t that girl?”
So this participant endorsed by Nijino is yet to come. I’m honestly looking forward to seeing her.
Can someone surpass Akane Kurokawa’s performance? Hard to imagine. Even Taiki saw himself having a hard time had he been presented with such a task.
“That performance set the bar incredibly high. It'll take something truly exceptional to surpass it.”
I wonder what kind of performance this girl Nijino mentioned will deliver. Beneath his impassive stance, Taiki was pounding with anticipation.

The entire hall reverberated with applause.
Akane Kurokawa didn't immediately realize the applause was for her, partly because she was still disoriented from being immersed in the performance. It felt like returning from another world. *Are they angry? Did I do something bad without noticing it?* A fleeting sense of panic washed over her.
Akane hurried to get offstage, turning her back to the audience area and heading towards the seats reserved for the participants. Arriving there, she felt the atmosphere surrounding her change. Emily Takafuji, Riko Suzumi, and everyone else had a look of surprise.
“Honestly, that was impressive.”
The one who said that was Kana-chan. She glanced sideways at Akane and continued

to speak with an unchanging expression.
“I thought you were just a plain girl, but you really pulled off a great act.”
“Ah, well… T-Thank—”
“But…” Faster than Akane could express her gratitude, Kana-chan cut her off.
“Sorry, I’m not losing this.”
“Eh?”
“This audition—no way I’m letting you have it. I’ll be the winner.”
Kana-chan's statement left Akane stunned. It felt almost like a declaration of war.
Did Kana-chan recognize me as an adversary? Akane swallowed nervously.

Subsequently, another short, unremarkable hour passed for Taiki Himekawa.
Following Akane Kurokawa, a succession of mediocre presentations took place.
One of the participants, akin to the first girl to perform, simply stood silently, unsure what to do, and promptly left the stage afterward. Meanwhile, another girl ripped off Emily Takafuji’s Atmosphere dance.
Taiki's unimpressed response was, “It is what it is.” *Well, I suppose this is the standard for this generation of actresses; Akane Kurokawa was just an outlier. At the end of the day, Nijino’s task was too hard, I guess.*
At least the seventh participant, Riko Suzumi, was interesting in some way. The moment the curtains opened, she confidently shouted, “I’m the atmosphere!”, getting a smile from her fellow actors and from staff members. Rather than focusing on the quality of the performance, her goal was to surprise the audience and make herself stand out.
Taiki didn’t consider it a bad idea.
Taiki opened the can of Coke in his hand, which Shuugo Nijino had brought during the interval, and gulped it down. As it lost its fizz, the flavor progressively weakened. *Guess the atmosphere does play a role, whether for the coke or in this audition.*
“Next candidate, you may enter.”
The staff member called, receiving an “Understood” for an answer. As the young girl got up on stage, Taiki felt she looked familiar. She had a beret over her bob cut and a girlish

dress that covered her small body.
“That girl, uh, what was her name again?”
“Kana Arima-san,” Nijino replied. “She’s a genius child actress who took the country by storm a few years ago. You remember, don’t you?”
“Oh yeah, I do.” Taiki nodded.
“I haven’t seen a trace of her these days. I didn’t know she was still in the acting business.”
“Yes, that seems to be the case.”
“So, is she your favorite?”
“Mmm,” Nijino let out a slight chuckle. “Correct, it’s her.”
“That’s surprising. I thought nobody held her in high regard anymore, now that her prime as a child actress is long past.”
“And that’s what makes her interesting.” Nijino stared at Kana, a pleasant look decorating his face. He continued, as if thinking aloud, “She's a genius child actress seeing her career slip through her fingers, now using a reignited fire in her heart to make a last stand. Isn’t it exciting to wonder what she has to show for herself?”
According to Nijino, Kana Arima went as far as bowing her head to the ground to get into this audition.
That, for Taiki, was a fresh surprise. He may not know the details, but it seemed to be a commendable attitude, strikingly unlike the bad reputation that surrounded her.
“People like that, who know what it feels like to have their mental fortitude pressed to the limit, can sporadically deliver a gripping and insightful performance. You do know that, don’t you, Himekawa-kun?”
Questioned by Nijino, Taiki nodded, “Yeah, I guess.”
Taiki himself fit that description, having once lost his parents to a double suicide—a tragedy that took a severe toll on his mental health and left a memory burned in his mind.
Yet, for that same reason, Taiki could use this memory on stage. Acquainted with the feeling of having his mind pushed to the edge, he could replicate it. “The boy who can express the melancholy of the human heart.” That was what the media called him.
Taiki Himekawa’s impressive fame at his age, for better or worse, was likely due to

having pulled through such tragedy in his life.
“I believe Kana Arima is also carrying her share of emotional baggage.”
Taiki put the can of Coke close to his feet and focused on the play.
What will the cornered genius child actress show us? The thought also intrigued Taiki.
Meanwhile, the person in question, an apprehensive look covering her face, was sitting on her heels right in the middle of the stage. That position put both Junichi Misawa, the Husband, and Nanako Nakamura, the Wife, in her line of sight. Apparently, her plan was to start the performance from there.
Once the staff member gave the sign, *The Quarrel* started for the eighth time.
“Why? Tell me why you always come home late!”
“Because I’m busy with work. Give me a break.”
In the same manner as before, an argument erupted between the couple.
Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura made their experience apparent; despite it being the eighth time they repeated the play, their performances hadn't gotten any less sharp. The argument was carried on just as intensely as before.
However, there was one clear difference from the previous seven presentations: Kana Arima was there, weak-kneed, and injecting herself into their argument.

“Dad? Mom? Why do you always look so scary?”

Taiki spontaneously gasped. The moment Kana Arima let her voice out, a feeling of tension, not present in the previous showings, inundated the play.
“I’m scared… Please, stop fighting…”
Her voice had a feeble, faltering tone. It seemed Kana Arima was playing the role of the couple’s child.
“Hmm,” Taiki folded his arms.
What is she up to? Weren’t the participants supposed to play the Atmosphere?
Questions began to pop into his mind.
“Dad made sure to get home before bedtime tonight. Let’s be nice to each other.”
Kana Arima, with a harrowing tone, pleaded to both of them.
However, the Wife, played by Nanako Nakamura, without even glancing in her direction,

screamed in a shrill voice.
“Always with that work excuse. You just dump all the housework on me so you can go out with other women!”
“I don’t have other women. Cut it out with those allegations.”
And of course, Junichi Misawa hadn't given Kana Arima any response either.
It was only natural for them to act in that manner. The child Kana Arima was playing wasn’t in the script, to which both actors, as the professionals they were, remained faithful, not giving the ad-lib any reaction, and thus, keeping the audition impartial.
Kana Arima should be plainly aware of that fact, and yet, she continued to act as if it didn’t matter to her. Undisturbed by the indifference of Husband and Wife, she further pushed her performance.
“Dad, Mom. Please listen to me. Stop fighting!”
Kana Arima inserted herself between the two of them, and yet, neither side looked at her. As the script dictated, the couple could only scowl at each other, almost like Kana Arima had devised this *Child* role with such indifference in mind.
Sitting next to Taiki, Nijino stroked his beard. “Oh, I see it.” Brimming with excitement, he attentively continued to watch Kana Arima on stage.
“What an unexpected course of action coming from her.”
“Course of action? What do you mean by that?”
“It seems that her interpretation of Atmosphere is ‘the same as existing but having no presence.’”
“Existing but having no presence?”
Well, the word “atmosphere” was sometimes used in that way in Japanese; there were idioms like “They blend in the background,”[3] which described someone as irrelevant or worthless.
In that manner, you could say the child, who was completely disregarded by the couple, was precisely that type of “atmosphere.”
As Taiki repeatedly nodded, he set his mind to closely watch Kana Arima’s performance.
She raised her eyes to look at Husband and Wife, her emotions boiling as she

[3] *TN: Literally, “They are atmosphere.”*

panicked. At that moment, she was just a child, powerless over the fight that unfolded in front of her, portraying such a child as the Atmosphere.

Nijino, beside him, as well as all other staff members, had their eyes fixated on the *Atmospheric Child* role Kana Arima played. Her novel interpretation of the script had everyone immersed.

I can't take my eyes off her. What's this feeling?

That was the intensity of her performance.

Years of experience, vast diligence, and the ceaseless rumination over the philosophy of theater were all evident in her acting.

The sympathy evoked by the rawness of her performance, her dynamic, orchestrated, and unsettling pacing, her striking movements that pierced through the heart, and the vulnerability in her delivery, which haunted the psyche of the audience—these were skills on a level Akane Kurokawa was yet to acquire.

This is what people call prowess.

On second thought, was this idea of *Atmospheric Child* really that original?

From an interpretation standpoint, Akane Kurokawa was still superior. If anything, Kana's idea

wasn't that innovative; more like it was a strategy that no other participant until now had happened to pick.

However, she made it feel original.

Thinking more rationally, she took what should have been just a mundane idea and managed to make people think, "That's so unique," and "How has nobody tried this until now?"

This wasn't unheard of in art. Many times, what was initially deemed a revolutionary idea, upon further inspection, simply proved to be a better one. And, when combined with other elements, such "better" became stellar.

And that was what Kana Arima's performance was doing, turning "better" into stellar.

How curious. Taiki thought. Kana Arima was, on stage, the Atmosphere ignored by its parents; yet, ignoring her was the one thing nobody in the audience could do.

"It seems you still got it, genius child actress."

Taiki corrected his posture and fixated his attention on the play. A shiver of excitement,

identical to when Akane Kurokawa performed, ran down his spine.

“Kana-chan…”

Kana-chan Kana-chan.

Akane Kurokawa’s eyes, for an outsider, seemed like those of a fan looking at their diva.

Amazing, superb! How is she able to glue everyone’s attention with her acting like that? It doesn’t feel dull even for a second; every single moment is so packed with meaning! She’s completely devouring Misawa-san and Nakamura-san! That’s the Kana-chan I know!

Despite knowing Kana’s personality, despite being hurt by her, Akane was still, through and through, an importunate fan. It was simply impossible for her to not be excited upon witnessing an authentic performance by Kana-chan.

However, she then realized she was still in the middle of an audition. First, she cleared her throat; second, she took multiple deep breaths; and then, she separated her conscious self from the environment, similar to what she had done on stage.

Making sure her mind was calmer, she began to evaluate Kana’s performance through the lens of an actress.

“Today, I gave my best in the school’s marathon. I even got tenth place. Are you listening?”

The Atmosphere, whom Kana-chan played, a child as invisible as air, was such a pitiable little girl.

It didn’t matter how much she asserted herself; neither Husband nor Wife even bothered to glance in her direction. *The mere sight of this scene is enough to pull at one's heartstrings.*

“Yeah, I’ve got plenty of affairs! But have some sympathy!”

“Sympathy? You have no idea how much I’m going through.”

“So, what do you even want from me?”
Junichi Misawa raised his voice in anger; immediately, Kana-chan quivered in fear. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, moistening her pale face.
Ah! She’s the heroine. Akane thought. *If this were an actual play, the one evoking empathy from the audience would be neither the Husband nor the Wife; it would be Kana-chan.*
Such had been the case for a long time. Kana-chan was known as the “Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat,” after all. Her heartfelt and realistic performances stirred up feelings of ‘How pitiful’ and ‘I want to help her’ in the public.
Kana-chan is just amazing! Akane let out a sigh of astonishment.
It wasn’t the innocent angel type of performance that she favored so much, but she couldn’t deny it was another thing Kana-chan had mastered.
“Do—do you hate me? Dad, Mom…”
Tears rolled down her face, one of her signature moves, her “crying act.” They left countless little traces across her tiny cheeks, something that Akane, before, had only seen through a screen.
Yet, as Akane witnessed this crying act with her very own eyes, a thought arose in her mind.
Are those tears really just for show?
Each drop of them fell with so much weight. As they, lukewarm, splashed onto the ground, Akane almost felt as if they touched her feet.
She could merely commend the astonishing performance. Saying to herself, “That’s the unbeatable Kana-chan” with the admiring eyes of a fan. But, standing there as a fellow actress, she noticed a puzzling oddity. *Could this acting be derived from some real-life experience?* Akane’s eyes focused, not on the pitiable child on stage, but on the individual named Kana Arima.
Are those tears from the person Kana Arima herself?
Is she actually crying instead of just acting? Could it be that something is tormenting her, that she has some kind of intangible wound, and that those tears are spurting through a fracture of a broken heart? Akane pinned her gaze upon Kana Arima.
Of course, she knew for a fact how good Kana-chan’s acting ability was. Shedding tears

identical to real ones was completely within her reach.
And yet, for some reason, Akane could not perceive those tears as false.
What if, inside that tiny body of hers, lay an ineffable pain?
Akane couldn't help but feel that way.

Kana Arima intensely sobbed.
"Dad, Mom, why are you always fighting? Is it my fault? Have I been a bad girl?"
As she wiped her tears, Kana looked up to the spotlight.
How long has it been since I shed tears in front of an audience like this? Half a year, one year…? And to think that just the other day, on stage or in front of the cameras, I was the coveted "Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat."
A few years ago, during the greetings for a certain play, the host of a TV show asked her, "Kana-chan, how are you so skilled at crying?"
With the microphone pointed to her face, her answer was something like, "Before I realized, it became almost second nature to me." Following that, her memory was of both the host and her fellow actors expressing their praises: "No wonder you're a genius."
However, "It became almost second nature to me" wasn't the correct way to put it.
What Kana was doing on stage was shouting out loud her actual emotions.
What she presented there was nothing more than her own unadulterated self.
There, with no risk of being judged, without the need of concealing anything, she could lay her genuine sorrows bare.
For a long time, Kana could not express complaints in her personal life; of course, everything was for Mom. If it was something that brought joy to Mom, then Kana, no matter how much she hated the job or how much the schedule strained her, had to wear the image of the devoted girl who relished her work.
The Kana which laughed off-stage was a lie.
The one who cried on stage was real.

Solely during her performances, Kana was permitted to let her real emotions burst forth. Only when she was on stage, or when the cameras were on, was the ‘good girl’ mask allowed to come off.

For that reason, she loved acting; this was why she had gotten so absorbed into it. She was allowed to feel joy. She was allowed to cry. There was no job she loved more than being an actress. *I want to be here forever. I don’t want to go back to that so-called reality.* For Kana Arima, the world of acting was, more than anywhere else, her place of comfort.

That world where you have to keep a smile no matter how much Mom takes her anger out on you.

That world where you have to feel the frustration of losing a job, the sadness of being expelled from your agency, and the responsibility of taking care of your bawling mother. I don’t want to go back there.

The fabricated world of acting was the sole place where Kana could shed the tears she had restrained for so long.

In front of her, Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura, as Husband and Wife, proceeded to go at each other hammer and tongs.

“What’s the point of talking anyway? I can’t understand you one bit.”

“Maybe because you don’t even try to. How about using your brain for once?”

At one point, the sight of their performances began to recall her real parents’ quarrels.

How long ago was it? Since Mom exploded at Dad, screaming that he had cheated on her or something.

Yet, was it entirely Dad’s fault? Kana overflowed with doubts. *Didn’t Dad have a reason to want to get away from Mom?* She could not shake that thought out of her head.

At that time, Mom used to spend Kana’s child actress money like water. She seemed to take pleasure in buying expensive makeup, traveling around, and going to clubs. Eventually, Dad became disgusted by seeing Mom living high on the hog, acting like she was a celebrity.

Kana herself did not find anything wrong with Mom’s spending habits. After all, if the money she earned through hard work pleased Mom so much, that was wonderful. However, Kana’s attitude towards it only further ignited his anger.

“What do you think you’re doing? Taking advantage of Kana’s kindness like that!”
Of course, Mom retorted. There was nothing she hated more than being rebuked.
“I’m making sure Kana can hold herself up in this industry! Do you have any idea how show business works? You gotta make some investments, or you’ll be looked down upon! And you accuse me of being in the wrong for spending her money? What, do you want to make her lose her status? Don’t you dare poke your nose when you don’t even bother to lift a finger!”
And from that point on, they began to tear each other piece by piece.
At the time, Kana desperately acted as if nothing was happening. A stark contrast to the Child she was currently playing. Quietly avoiding the living room, she pretended not to hear their altercations.
For Kana, the living room was not a place to have a warm meal; rather, it was a hell on earth, in which her family tore itself apart.
Had she stayed there, she probably would have been questioned, “Which side are you on?”
Crying in that situation would probably make things harder for her parents. With that conclusion, she avoided the place.
In the end, was that the correct choice, or not? She wasn’t sure.
Ultimately, Dad ended up leaving. Following that, Mom began to meddle in Kana’s jobs more and more. That was all.
It feels lonely without Dad, but this is a problem between the two of them.
At that time, her own presence was treated as air.
Kana turned her gaze, facing Husband and Wife, and elevated her voice.
“Dad, Mom, look at me. Please, look at me!”
Perhaps those were the words she longed to yell on that day. Now, she enacted a brutal yet cathartic, ceaseless flood of drowned and bottomless emotions, lodged in her heart like plaque. *How nice it must be.* Kana mentally sighed.
It probably feels wonderful being able to express your emotions as you please in front of your parents. I could’ve never done it myself.
With that thought in her mind, she persisted in shedding a flood of tears.

Taiki Himekawa, deep inside, was considerably shaken by Kana Arima's cries. The sorrow of the Atmospheric Child she played tightened around his heart, and intense goosebumps spread over his body.

I heard she hit a dry spell in show business recently. What a huge waste. Even in Lala Lai, you can't find many people capable of pulling off a performance of that level.

Kana Arima's presentation on stage neared its end. And Taiki wasn't the only one wanting to see more of it.

"The vibe she gives is fundamentally different from the previous seven participants; it's quite striking."

"Correct." Nijino nodded.

"All previous participants, including Akane Kurokawa, had their minds set on the idea of the quarrel between Husband and Wife as the core of the play. And, from that standpoint, they tried to develop their Atmosphere roles by considering how they would connect to this core."

"And, well, that was the type of performance I had envisioned." Nijino continued.

"However, Kana Arima went in the opposite direction. She's using the quarrel between Husband and Wife to make her Atmosphere role become the thing that stands out the most on stage. The play is now completely under her control."

"That's how it is; even with the festering state of her career, there's a reason why she's called a 'Genius Child Actres.'"

"I guess 'festering' never fit her. Look at those eyes; they are the eyes of a real actress."

I guess that's the case. Taiki thought. All staff members in the room had their sights riveted on her performance.

Her big round eyes were as gleaming and dazzling as a pristine gem.

"Why do you never listen to what I have to say? Dad, Mom…"

Kana Arima let out a choked, continuous cry.

Even after hearing her nickname, 'The Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat,' so many times, I never imagined she was able to present such a raw cry. That performance isn't possible without a corresponding level of emotion.

“Fighting is bad! Please stop it!”

Taking no notice of Kana Arima’s cry, the Wife, played by Nanako Nakamura, shrieked.

“I can’t live like this anymore.”

“Then, I guess it’s better for us to separate.”

“Are you serious?”

As the lights dimmed, little by little, the play came to its end. Kana Arima’s quiet sobbing was the only thing that reverberated across the hall.

The melancholic closing of the curtains ingrained a dramatic presage, as if to say, “And so, the child’s voice will continue to be disregarded by her parents.”

In the end, Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura concluded the play without ever, not even for a second, turning their eyes towards Kana Arima’s performance. This time, instead of playing a “couple arguing,” they had embodied the role of “coldhearted parents, indifferent to their child.” Perhaps this was the result of Junichi Misawa and Nanako Nakamura being forcibly sucked into Kana Arima’s vision for the play.

In the world of theater, there were those capable of exerting command over their fellow actors through their performances, leaving them no choice but to follow. There is one word commonly used to describe such people: charismatic.

Glimpses of such charisma could be sensed in that genius child actress.

As Taiki looked down at the stage, a big sigh came out of his mouth.

“Damn, she’s insane.”

You’d expect her ability as an actress to take a toll during her dry period, but she remains as talented as ever. That performance was plain fun to watch.

Even Nijino, with a gratified expression, nodded repeatedly.

“Oh my, what a dilemma we’ve got here. This audition turned out to be a bountiful harvest.”

“Are you referring to Akane Kurokawa and Kana Arima?”

“Yes, both of them are incredibly talented. It’s hard to say which one was better.”

Those two performances were obviously the cream of the crop. Taiki shared the same view.

“They are completely opposite types. On one side, we have Akane Kurokawa, with her exceptional perception and ability to blend with her surroundings; on the other, Kana

Arima, who drags others into her field unceremoniously. Merely comparing the two is already fascinating."

There were several types among the so-called genius actors; "Possessed" and "Assertive" types were two such terms.

The possessed types, sometimes also referred to as immersive types, were capable of fully becoming their roles on stage. Such actors could morph their consciousness into that of their roles. When they acted on stage, it wasn't through careful thought of each action. In their case, if the actor were compared to hardware, the role would be software that operates automatically once developed and booted up.

From what he had seen, Taiki felt Akane Kurokawa fit into that type.

On the other hand, Kana Arima could be classified as an assertive type. Such actors, through the strong expression of their emotions, were capable of attracting the eyes of everyone around. They possess the talent to lead not only the audience but also their fellow actors. Of course, it wasn't something that anyone could do; such ability requires fierce star power.

Sprouts of both types of talent could be felt in those two girls. *Either of them is an unexpected treasure.* Taiki sighed. *If possible, I'd love to co-act with them someday.*

"Kurokawa or Arima, choosing one or the other would significantly alter the vibe of the play."

"Correct once again, Himekawa-kun. Just like you said."

And that's why it's so hard. Nijino nervously smiled.

According to him, having so much prominent talent gathered in a single audition was no common occurrence.

"And of course, it isn't just the two of them. Emily Takafuji-san and Riko Suzumi-san also gave stand-out performances. Whoever I choose would make for an interesting play."

"I guess you could say this is a pleasant dilemma for someone in your position."

"That's correct. It's really difficult."

Nijino stroked his beard while questioning himself, "What do I do now?" He was not distressed; rather, his face showed delight.

Taiki thoroughly understood that feeling. Judging so much talent in a single audition felt

like a waste.
“Ah, in that case, I’ve come up with an idea.”
Taiki shared with Nijino the sudden thought that occurred in his mind. An idea that came in the heat of the moment, yet he didn’t consider it a bad one.
“Really?” Nijino heard it with profound interest.
“That—sounds pretty good.”
His acceptance seemed to be instant. “It’s decided, we’re taking this route,” he said, smiling. To that, Taiki replied, “You don’t waste a second, do you?” also smiling.
Both of them, sneakily continuing their private exchange in their seats, looked like two prankster young boys planning their next move. In fact, Taiki had every intention of messing around with those two girls through his idea.
In the end, would Akane Kurokawa and Kana Arima see such mischief as an opportunity or a trial? Not even Taiki was sure.
I have no idea; and that’s where the fun is.

Soon after finishing her performance on stage, Kana-chan returned to her seat.
Akane Kurokawa involuntarily took a peek at her expression. The overly realistic crying act from before had triggered a feeling of worry inside of her.
Kana-chan’s eyes, swollen from crying, had turned into a bright red, reminiscent of a rabbit. Yet, there wasn’t a trace of sadness in her expression; rather, she looked slightly relaxed as she approached her seat.
Guess I was mistaken after all. Kana-chan’s appearance hasn’t changed a bit.
Noticing Akane’s unflinching stare, Kana-chan frowned.
“What? Got any problem?”
“Ah!” Akane stumbled over her words. She could not ask something like, “Were those tears just now real?” Kana-chan hated her after all.
How do I answer? During Akane’s moment of hesitation, a female staff member approached their seats.
“I have come to inform you that the result of this audition has been decided.”

The waiting room became suddenly noisy. Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi looked at each other, saying, “No way!” and “Already?” Akane, too, had not anticipated such swift resolution. Not even ten minutes had passed since the eighth performance, by Kana-chan, had finished. She had expected to wait nearly an hour to see the outcome.

Nonetheless, they shouldn’t rush something so important. Maybe the choice was obvious for the examiners.

“That said, I will be announcing who passed from now on.”

The staff member paused for a moment.

Multiple sounds of nervous swallowing could be heard in her surroundings. Everyone was wishing to hear their names being called.

I know this feeling well. I came to this audition more for others than for myself, but now, after going through so much effort to give that performance, I’d like to at least see my hard work receive some recognition.

The staff member looked around, taking a peek at the participants’ faces, and then informed them in a clear and distinct voice.

“Emily Takafuji-san.”

Following it, a massive noise took over the waiting room. Murmurs of “Expected” and “It’s her after all” could be heard across the place.

Emily herself raised the corners of her mouth, making a face as if she was saying, “It’s only natural.” It seemed a reasonable choice given her popularity and acting career. Yet, for Akane, such a result seemed odd; if someone were to be chosen, it would have been Kana-chan, she thought.

The Kana-chan in question was frozen in place, with an expression that said, “Uh?” Her face was pale in a way Akane had never seen before. Almost as if she had heard the proclamation of the end of the world.

How is this even possible? Judging by the ability to easily attract the eyes of the public, Kana-chan was unmatched among her generation. That alone should have been obvious.

If you’re watching TV, yeah, Emily Takafuji is in vogue now. But Kana-chan had presented a much, much more amazing performance than her. This couldn’t have been the result of Akane’s biased view; rather, it should have been obvious to anyone who

watched.

What were the examiners even paying attention to? Akane frowned in disapproval. The staff member continued, “And…”

“Kana Arima-san. Riko Suzumi-san.”

Kana-chan, once again, widened her eyes. So did Akane. Riko Suzumi, whose name was also included, as well as all other participants, undoubtedly found the situation to be strange.

Why were multiple names called? Wasn’t this audition solely for one role?

Amid the commotion that had spread in the room, the staff member further continued.

“Lastly, Akane Kurokawa. You have all passed.”

Akane couldn’t believe her ears. Was it really her name that had just been called?

What’s happening here?

“I’m sorry, but I ask those whose names were not called to leave. As for the ones who passed, you will receive instructions regarding the second phase of the audition.”

All candidates who hadn’t been called left their seats with a defeated look. Akane felt pity towards them, but she felt an even greater worry about what was to come.

Second phase? It seemed the audition had not ended yet. She didn’t recall any notice regarding multiple phases in the first place.

Kana-chan, as well as Emily-san and Riko-san, who were also called by the staff member, all had bewildered looks.

The first one to raise her voice in doubt was Emily-san.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I heard that this audition was one phase only.”

“Well, that was the case. However, there have been unforeseen circumstances.”

“Unforeseen circumstances?”

Just as Emily-san began to tilt her head, puzzled, she was surprised by a male voice, “Ah, my apologies.”

Holding a cane in his hand, an old gentleman peeked through the door. It was the organizer of the current audition, Shuugo Nijino-san.

“Originally, my plan was to decide the heroine through one trial. However, all of you displayed an acting ability that exceeded my expectations; as a result, it became impossible to decide in that manner.”

An acting ability that exceeded my expectations. Hearing those words, Akane felt a tingling, awkward sensation. A director of Shuugo Nijino's caliber had just praised their performances. That was a cause for genuine joy.

Emily-san and Riko-san's faces also showed they weren't all dissatisfied with that.

The only one who had a stern, pinched look was Kana-chan. Her eyes told of her acute desire to pass the audition at any cost.

She intently stared at Nijino-san, asking, "Then…"

"Are you going to hold another trial and decide the heroine through it?"

"Precisely." Nijino deeply nodded. "The second trial will be conducted in a new format. Through that, we expect to judge your abilities through a different angle."

"A different angle?"

"Yes, another examiner proposed this idea." Nijino grinned mischievously, his teeth faintly in sight.

So, it seems there is another examiner besides Nijino-san. For Akane, who regarded Shuugo Nijino-san as a director who liked to keep things in-house and under his control, that was a surprise.

What type of person would someone like Nijino-san trust enough to be an examiner?

After clearing his throat for a moment, Nijino stared at the remaining participants one by one and calmly informed them.

"The second trial will be held in about a month. That is the time you will need to prepare."

"Prepare?"

Riko Suzumi-san tilted her head.

"Yes. In the second phase, you will perform in pairs."

Acting in pairs? Akane frowned. Who would she have to act alongside? Would it be with a professional, like the current audition, or with one of her fellow participants?

The latter would be a bit difficult. Akane thought.

Excluding Akane, there were three options, and she wasn't close to any of them.

Maybe it could work out with Emily Takafuji-san or Riko Suzumi-san. The problem was Kana-chan. Akane could not picture partnering with her as anything but a thorny road.

Taking no notice of Akane's uneasiness, Nijino-san proceeded with his explanation.
"The first pair will be composed of Emily Takafuji-san and Riko Suzumi-san."
Nijino-san gently smiled while glancing in their direction.
As she had thought, the pairs would be with their fellow participants. If Emily-san and Riko-san formed the first one, then, by process of elimination, Akane's pair became clear.
Akane instinctively turned her gaze in Kana-chan's direction.
Her big round eyes, still swollen red, intently stared back at Akane, who promptly gulped.
Even when their eyes crossed, Kana-chan's expression did not change. Was she angry or sad? Akane could not tell. A moment later, she, abruptly and with a displeased look, turned her gaze away.
Nijino-san cleared his throat again and continued.
"And the second pair will be composed of Akane Kurokawa-san and Kana Arima-san."
After hearing her name being called alongside Kana-chan's, Akane's heart skipped a beat.
"For the second phase, those two pairs will be performing separately. Similar to the first phase, the distribution of roles and direction will be up to you."
At that moment, Kana-chan raised her hand. "I have a question."
"Go ahead." Nijino urged her.
"I have understood that we will be acting in pairs. But, in the end, only one person will be chosen for the role of heroine, correct?"
"Yes, that would be correct." Nijino then continued to talk in a delighted tone, "Your pair is an ally and a rival at the same time."
Upon consideration, it was a complicated connection.
Akane never imagined that she and Kana-chan would have such a relationship.
"Please, use this time to get along and prepare yourselves."
Nijino-san said, cheerfully smiling. *Is it just me, or does it look like he's smiling at me specifically?*
I don't feel like I can get along with Kana-chan. Akane could feel a gloomy anxiety spreading inside of her.

Chapter 3

Hearing her name called among the successful participants didn't bring Kana Arima any particular sense of joy.

She had already anticipated the need for a second phase. Seeing Akane Kurokawa's performance convinced her that the examiners would have a rough time deciding a winner.

The moment Shuugo Nijino finished his explanation, staff members began distributing to each qualified participant an A4-sized handout. It contained the time and date for the next audition and noted that the script was to be sent by mail at a later date.

"Hmm…" Kana Arima murmured, her eyes skimming the handout.

What type of role will we be given next time? Will it be another original script?

While Kana was visibly puzzled, the staff member added, "The script of the second phase is from one of Shuugo Nijino's unreleased works."

"As previously informed, you and your pair are free to decide who will play each role as you see fit. You will have one month to prepare. Be sure to plan your performances accordingly."

You'll need to come to an agreement with your pair on various things. In other words, they're likely aiming to also test the ability to communicate outside the stage.

That's not my forte, but it's not like I have any choice.

"The time given to each pair to perform will be roughly 15 minutes. We will take responsibility for the backgrounds and extras. Meanwhile, other things like costumes and props will be left to your own discretion."

"Whoa!" Those words took Kana's breath away for a second. *We'll have that much time to perform? Not to mention each pair will be able to just choose the costumes and props they prefer.* For her, that sounded like a standard and formal audition, a stark contrast to the first phase. Naturally, Kana deduced she would need to approach it with stern professionalism.

“In case you have any other questions, we ask you to direct them to the administration committee.”

Finishing her explanation, the staff member dismissed the participants.

Where could I get the costume? Kana was faintly worried. She first considered using a connection in her former agency, only to realize her recent dismissal meant she would need to find another way.

Stealing a glance at Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi, she saw them already leaving the room together while exchanging casual chatter.

“Where should we go to celebrate?” “What about a Starbucks?” “Sounds good to me.”

They kept smiling at each other, showing their natural bond as two child actresses from the same theater company.

Well, I suppose I also need to get at least a little close to my pair if I want to have any chance.

Kana shifted her gaze to Akane Kurokawa, only for the girl to avoid eye contact right away.

“Ah,” Kana sighed. That girl, of all people, really ended up being her pair. For Kana, Akane making it to the second phase was a foregone conclusion after the level of ability she displayed.

However, at the same time, Kana anticipated she would be a handful to act alongside. That honest and plain demeanor spoke of a sheltered girl who had been raised by a compassionate family. Her character itself was at odds with Kana's; getting along with her would be anything but simple.

But anyway, communication is key for a joint performance. Kana made up her mind, left her seat, and approached Akane Kurokawa with a simple “Hey.”

The girl shivered for a second, straightening her posture, timidly looking sideways at Kana. Her expression was that of panic, as if she had seen a menacing creature. Was Kana really that threatening?

What a weird girl! Why is she so scared? She’s one head taller than me. Kana thought.

Holding back an exasperated sigh, she tried to talk again.

“Welp, looks like we’re a pair now.”

“A-A-Ah, yes… I guess.”
Akane clumsily displayed a robotic smile, only to shift her focus to her own feet a moment later, avoiding any eye contact.
Does she hate me? Kana wondered. *I can’t think of a reason for her to avoid me this much. But anyway, the only thing that matters is that we’re partners now. I have to find a way to get across to her if I want any hope of doing a good performance.*
“Ahem,” Kana began.
“Do you have anything you want to say? You look like you do.”
“Eh?” Akane was lost for words. *So I was right on the money after all. She has “There’s something I want to say” plastered all over her face.*
“Don’t you think it’d be uncomfortable to work together while having reservations about each other? I believe the earlier we come clean with one another, the better.”
Akane was left with her heart in her mouth by Kana's words, her voice dissolving into a repetitive stutter.
Kana had no idea what the girl wanted to say but had every intention of apologizing if the situation were to remain stagnant. Not like she was happy to bow her head when she didn’t even know what she had done, but right now, she was committed to following the director’s advice: “Treat those around you better.” There was nothing more important for her at the moment than passing the audition.
However, Akane’s next words blindsided Kana.
“W-Well, there’s one thing I want to ask… Kana-chan, why were you crying at that moment?”
“What?” Kana couldn’t believe her ears.
“What are you even saying all of a sudden?”
“I-It’s just that… during your performance…” Akane continued, her voice quivering. “It looked like you were suffering so much, Kana-chan. S-So, I was wondering if anything had happened to you…”
Kana was petrified at Akane’s astoundingly keen eye.
Just as she said, Kana’s “cries” weren’t an act. They were but a public display of the feelings she actively restrained deep inside.
It was even ironic, from a certain perspective. So many times she was called “The

Genius Child Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat," when, in reality, even an ordinary person could pull that off. Kana Arima's cries weren't acting in the slightest.

Even then, I have zero obligation to share that with someone else. The thought of a girl raised in a happy family like Akane Kurokawa finding out is especially annoying. I'd rather take the secret to my grave than have to deal with a girl like her staring at me with pity.

Consequently, she chose to lie.

"I was just acting. I did it because I had to."

"Really?" Akane frowned. "I know how good you are at crying, Kana-chan. It's just that… seeing your crying face in person, it felt overly realistic."

"Of course not, that's—that's not the case."

"Could it be…" Akane continued.

"Kana-chan, do you also have something to say?"

"Something to say?"

"Is there anything that you desperately want to share with someone but can't because of any circumstances?"

Kana gulped. *What's this girl trying to imply?*

Akane continued to unflinchingly stare at Kana. Those eyes, gleaming like pearls, seemed to see right through Kana's outer shell.

"K-Kana-chan, if there's anything you wish to address, I'm all ears."

"What?"

"It's just… I feel we were paired together for a reason. So, if anything is bothering you, you can count on me for advice. I promise not to tell anyon—"

"There's none." Kana cut her off.

"Like I'd need to ask anything from you."

"Eh…"

"Could you chill out with that sort of talk when we've just become partners? I don't want you looking at me like we were some sort of buddies the same day we just met."

Kana recognized the harsh language she used. However, she didn't want anyone barging into that personal matter.

"Ah…" Akane turned pale at Kana's rebuke. "I-I'm so sorry…"

“That’s enough for today. I need some rest.”
Kana turned her back to Akane and declared, “I’ll contact your troupe once we receive the script.” She took her belongings and hastily left, not even bothering to say a “Goodbye,” or any other word.
Akane’s multiple sensitive questions had, certainly, in a way, gotten on her bad side. But what she felt, by far, was dread over Akane’s keen eyes, dread that the “Kana Arima” she had been building up to that point could crumble.

Arriving at home, the first thing Akane Kurokawa did was rush to her room, cover her entire body with a blanket, and tightly hug her stuffed bear, letting out an audible sigh, “A-Ah…”
“I did it again… I said what I shouldn’t.”
Carefully reconsidering the words she had said with the best of intentions, she probably had come across as overbearing from Kana-chan’s perspective. Akane wasn’t anything close to a friend for Kana-chan. She had made that abundantly clear when she said, “I hate you” all that time ago.
It’s only natural that Kana-chan would get angry after hearing “You can count on me” from Akane. How could she be so spectacularly bad at reading the room?
I’m truly worthless when it comes to this, Akane thought.
It was no different from school. Despite wanting to get closer to others, she never quite managed to pick up on the social boundaries between friends. Her constant absences because of practice or stage presentations also led to her becoming a somewhat faint presence.
Lifting her head from the stuffed bear, she glanced at her bookshelf.
There, multiple introductory psychology books were lined up: “How to Understand Other People,” “Behavioral Psychology for Dummies,” and “Basic Psychology for Children,” among others.
All of them were books Akane had asked her parents to buy.
How could Kana-chan, someone who, by all rights, should sincerely love acting, resign

herself to a rigged audition and even go as far as saying, “Acting doesn’t matter” to her? She, more than anything, wanted to comprehend those paradoxical feelings.

Akane’s intentions were to just read the introductory book she had asked for and study the subject a little. However, she still couldn’t bring herself to understand the reason. Be it the Kana-chan of the past or the Kana-chan who she had just reencountered, no matter how much she tried to rationalize Kana-chan’s actions, she was still a total enigma.

I can’t understand because I’m an idiot; that’s why. Akane honestly believed that. What use did memorizing all that information have when she was unable to properly use it?

How, how can I understand other people’s feelings? How can I bond with them without making them mad?

While those anxieties tortured her mind, a considerable amount of time passed without her realizing. As the darkness of the night gathered outside the window, the temperature dropped, giving way to a shivering cold.

The faint scent of a stew sneaked into the room, making her stomach growl, a sign her mom was already preparing dinner in the kitchen.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

“Akane, are you there?”

It was Dad’s voice. He was a busy man, constantly occupied with work trips, and yet, he always made sure to have a happy dinner table with his family on the weekends. He was probably there to call Akane for their meal.

“Yes,” Akane responded, getting out of bed, turning on the lights, and opening the door for Dad.

“It’s almost time for dinner.”

Dad! Osamu Kurokawa had a reputation for being a gentle and amicable middle-aged man in the neighborhood. Tall and slim, with a flat belly despite being in his mid-40s, he had maintained a healthy physique since he was young. Akane strongly felt pride in her dad’s appearance, although she always kept said pride to herself. His hair had recently begun to thin slightly, but that only added to his charm.

“Ah, I-I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Uh?” Hearing Akane’s response, Dad tilted his head, realizing something wasn’t right. “Did something happen? You look so down.”

“E-Eh, i-it’s nothing, I’m fine.”

“Your hair is all messy,” Dad said, pointing to her head. “Every time you’re feeling down, you immediately cover your whole body with a blanket and audibly sigh. So, your hair being messy is a telltale sign you aren’t feeling well.”

Noticing her dad’s deduction, Akane instinctively touched her hair, stuttering, “A-Ah…” Just like he had pointed out, her hair was one scruffy mess. *This is so embarrassing.*

“I really can’t keep anything hidden from you, Dad.”

“Ha-ha-ha.” He smiled gently. “Well, let’s just say you need way more wit than this to deal with suspects every day.”

Dad, despite appearances, was one illustrious police officer, having served as senior superintendent in the Tokyo Police Department. He loved to repeat the same tired joke, “I’m superintended for superintendent,” although his recent promotion had rendered the pun useless, making him feel a bit blue. But Dad’s jokes weren’t funny to begin with, so nothing of value had been lost.

His nonchalant demeanor contrasted with his reputation as commander of countless criminal investigations concerning heinous crimes. There were even serious discussions over him taking the position of Superintendent General of the Metropolitan Police in the future. For someone like him, seeing through Akane’s barriers was child’s play.

“Then…” Dad directed a worried gaze towards Akane.

“What happened? I asked your mom about how the audition went, and it seemed to be a success.”

“I-It’s just that…”

Akane hesitated initially but firmly began to come clean about all the worries she had. Trying to conceal them any longer would do nothing but needlessly worry Mom and Dad; therefore, confessing them was the most sensible option.

Akane invited Dad into her room and had him sit on the bed. She pulled over the chair from her desk, sitting down to face him. She proceeded to take one deep breath, clearing her mind, and began to describe everything that had happened between her and Kana-chan: “W-Well…”

Her explanation didn't end at what happened that very day; from Kana-chan's attitude to even what had transpired years ago when their paths first crossed, she didn't omit a single detail. Recounting the ins and outs of her failures felt mortifying, but noticing Dad attentively listening in silence, Akane earnestly pushed through to the end of the lengthy explanation. Once she had finished, Dad looked at Akane, his eyes conveying appreciation, and said, "I see."

"Acting sure sounds pretty tough, huh?"

"Yes, and it's all my fault. If only I wasn't this socially inept."

As Akane described herself in a self-deprecating tone, Dad shook his head, saying, "That's not the case at all."

"For me, it looks like you're clearly improving; keep in mind how Mom is always cheering you on for it. However, things don't always go smoothly; everyone messes up sometimes."

Dad's kind words gently found their way to Akane's heart; seeing someone recognize her efforts instilled sincere joy in her.

Yes, even if I felt bad at school or in the theater so many times, I was able to keep going because of them, because of Mom and Dad. She thought.

"Then…" Akane asked her father. "How can I become able to understand Kana-chan—to understand other people?"

"How to understand other people… Well, that sure is far from simple. Even if you bury yourself in psychology books, that doesn't mean you'll turn into a telepath capable of reading everyone's minds."

Dad closed his eyes, delving deep into his inner thoughts, humming as he repeatedly tilted his head, taking his time. When he finally opened them, he asked Akane.

"Do you still remember when I taught you what profiling meant all that time ago?"

"Yes," Akane nodded. Back when she was around five years old, she had borrowed from Dad one of his books about profiling.

"It's the one about criminal investigation, right? I remember it explained how to deduce a criminal profile based on circumstantial evidence."

“Correct, it’s one of the investigation techniques the FBI developed. By seeking patterns across past crimes while using life experience and psychological principles as a foundation, it’s possible to infer things like age, lifestyle, and even the personality traits the culprit might have. The technique has been adopted and used in criminal investigations even here in Japan for a while.”

Akane had the memory of being stoked when she had first heard about it. Profiling sounded like a way of making the process of constructing a mental image of a fictional character much more direct. She thought about how perfect it seemed to be for devising a role for a play.

However, the book she had borrowed from her dad contained only the most basic principles of profiling, never going into further details over the unique ways it was applied by the police. Therefore, her attempts at applying it to her acting had fallen apart.

“Then, what are you trying to say by bringing this up?”

“When trying to learn about other people, there’s nothing more important than the amount of information.”

Dad took a pen and notebook out of his pocket, two tools he always kept with him in case he needed to record something for work, a tactic he far preferred over using an app on a smartphone.

Dad began to write down in the notebook, “Kana Arima, age: 12 years old,” “Most acclaimed performance: Decaying Family,” “Most famous song: Pepper Workout,” and so on and so forth until he reached the note “Acting doesn’t matter,” to which he added a question mark. He summarized everything Akane had spoken about a moment ago.

Afterward, Dad began to arrange the notes on top of the bed with “Kana Arima, age: 12 years old” at the heart of it. Her plays, her TV drama roles, her music career… At the end, Akane’s bed was wholly covered by information pertinent to Kana-chan.

This feels like a detective drama. Akane thought. *It’s just like those scenes where they stick a bunch of information about the victims and suspects on a whiteboard inside the office.*

Akane’s bed had turned into an investigation room where “Operation Kana Arima” took place. Akane let out a swift sigh of wonderment.

“It’s so cool. So this is what real profiling looks like. I hadn’t even noticed how much information about Kana-chan there was.”
“Not yet.” Dad shook his head. “This is far from enough.”
“Far from enough?”
“A human being is built on top of many layers of information, so it’s only natural you’ll need a lot of it if you want to deduce what is behind their rough exterior. Their favorite foods, their favorite subjects at school, how they spend their leisure time, and a bunch of other stuff. Only by integrating all those trivial traces of knowledge will you be able to devise a vague outline of their true character.”
So basically, profiling, akin to statistics, is grounded on a massive and comprehensive set of information. Dad continued.
“Even when you think you know a lot about the person, that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”
Dad took the note written “Most famous song: Pepper Workout,” while saying, “For example…”
“Kana-chan did sing ‘Pepper Workout,’ but have you ever stopped to imagine that she might actually not like peppers?”
“Wait, she doesn’t?”
“Patience, I’m bringing up an imaginary scenario.”
Dad put his fingers on his cheek while displaying a wry smile.
“Picture this situation: Kana-chan doesn’t like peppers. From that, try to conceive the following: ‘If that were the case, why would she sing that song?’ While trying to reflect on these matters, you might end up getting some leads. That’s an essential component of profiling.”
I get it now. The pieces had started to connect for Akane. Being a longtime fan had given her the illusion of knowing Kana-chan in depth, but now, that notion had been shattered. As a matter of fact, things like Kana-chan’s taste in food, as well as many other of her idiosyncrasies, were fundamentally foreign to her.
“In that case…” Akane straightened her posture.
“How can I gather information about her?”
“Good question. There are so many ways of digging up information. First things first…”
When Dad was about to start explaining, a voice coming from the living room

reverberated across the house: “Hey, you two!” It was Mom.
“The stew is getting cold. Get down here for dinner.”
Hearing Mom’s tired voice, Akane and Dad’s instinctive reaction was to glance at each other’s direction. Realizing he had completely forgotten his goal of calling Akane for dinner, Dad scratched the back of his head with a plain expression of embarrassment on his face.
“Well, let’s stop for now and come back to this after dinner.”
“Alright.” Akane nodded and then left her seat. Now, thanks to Dad, there wasn’t a trace of that previous anxiety in her head.
I gotta learn more about Kana-chan. The desire overflowed inside of her heart.

Three days after the first phase had ended, the script for the play finally arrived at Kana Arima’s house.
“*The Doting Goddess*—that seems to be the name.”
The recently delivered script was now in Mom’s hands. The second Kana had finished reading it, she heard, “Let me see it.”
When Kana told Mom she had passed the first phase, she got an unimpressed reaction, as if she had done a simple chore expected of her. For Mom, all that talk of desperately groveling on the ground was just some childish antic. Almost like she silently replied, *Well, of course you passed; the only surprise would be if you didn’t.*
Her eyes displayed intense eagerness as they devoured the script.
It would be better if you didn’t get so much into it, Kana thought, although that too was a common occurrence. Mom, worried as she always was, just couldn’t resist looking over every single thing involving Kana; trying to stop her would be arguing against a wall.
“The protagonists are the peasant girl and the Goddess… Looks like a classic fable where the virtuous peasant girl is saved by a goddess.”
That seemed to mostly define what *The Doting Goddess* was.
The play consisted of three acts.
Act One introduced how an average day in the village would go. In the outskirts of a

modest village lay the statue of a goddess, which had deteriorated with time.
All the villagers had long ago stopped taking notice of the Goddess; only a single peasant girl continued to show her sincere devotion towards the statue by brushing it. In time, the statue would grow deeply attached to her, for whom the girl, in turn, cultivated a profound affection.
With the beginning of Act Two, the village, someday, is struck by a massive fire. A scene where their abandonment and disregard for the statue of the Goddess had brought forth their fiery demise. Amongst the chaos, the peasant girl seeks the Goddess statue for salvation, which she is graced with by being miraculously taken away from all the burning horror.
In the third and last act, the now lonely peasant girl, being the only survivor, directs her gratitude towards the Goddess, who then vows, from that moment on, to forever protect the girl.
It wouldn't even be necessary to add an "And they lived happily ever after," from how obvious it was. It was just like the typical fables told for children where good is rewarded and evil is punished.
Mom closed the script and looked at Kana.
"If I'm remembering correctly, you and the other girl will have to agree on who gets each role."
"Yes, that was what they told us."
"Then, make sure to get the Goddess role."
Mom continued to speak in an unyielding manner.
"From what I could get out of this script, the Goddess is by far the most prominent character; all the attention will be on her. So you gotta play her if you want to pass the audition."
Is that really the case… Kana pondered.
She could certainly see where her mom was coming from; yet, knowing the examiner, her gut told her it wouldn't be as simple as "Play the biggest role and be the winner." Prominent or not, all roles were a core component of the play. An amateur could go for such crude decision-making, but it was challenging to entertain the idea of Shuugo Nijino choosing the same facile approach.

Despite her thoughts on the matter, Kana understood none of them would get across to Mom if she were to express herself. So, having long learned to just play along, she nodded and said, “Alright, I’ll do just that.” Luckily, the girl she had been paired with, Akane Kurokawa, didn’t seem the type to stand her ground when pressured; therefore, all Kana would need to do was push her a bit, and the girl would agree to let her take the Goddess role right away.

Just play along with what Mom says, and we won’t need to buy a new telephone.

“Really? You better take this really seriously, Kana-chan.”

Anything goes so that Mom doesn’t have another meltdown. That was the sole thought on her mind at that moment.

Akane Kurokawa was kneeling by Kana-chan’s feet and, using a small piece of cloth as a prop, pretended to finely polish her.

“The weather today sure looks a bit cloudy, but that doesn’t stop you from shining as beautifully as always, my Goddess.”

At that moment, Kana-chan's face was taken by an amicable smile as she fixated her attention on the kneeling Akane.

Exceptional as always, she emanates the ideal energy. Akane thought. Despite the standard practice clothes she wore, Kana-chan perfectly displayed the solemn presence of the Goddess; a fruit of her ripened acting abilities. Even if the place where they currently were, the practice room of the *Hydrangea Theatrical Company*, was more than familiar to Akane, she had come to feel an enveloping sensation, almost like she was in fact inside the outskirts of a village.

“Everyone may make a fool out of me for this, but you’re the patroness of this village, right, my Goddess? If we don’t show the devotion you deserve, divine hand will certainly come to strike us.”

At that exact moment, Akane diligently played the role of the peasant girl, who persisted in brushing the Goddess, the role Kana-chan had taken.

Akane Kurokawa was contacted by Kana Arima a few days after the first phase had

ended; it was around evening when she received a call right as she practiced inside *Hydrangea*. Kana-chan used the troupe's phone number to contact her, just as she had promised. "I want to start practicing for the second phase, so mind telling me when you're free?" Akane informed her she would be able to practice on Saturday, a day when Kana-chan's schedule was also free.

Okamura-san, the head of the troupe, gently gave her approval: "You two can use the practice room in your free time; the place is all yours." She seemed to show special consideration for Akane and her partner. *Thank you so much; I highly appreciate it.*

Days passed, and the weekend arrived at her doorstep. And so, Akane finally started to meet Kana-chan face-to-face in preparation for the second phase.

Kana-chan already entered the room by making a statement that surprised Akane.

"Here's how we're doing; I'll be the Goddess and you the peasant girl."

"What?" Akane was confounded. Kana-chan continued, "Ok, hear me out."

"I have way more stage presence, so I'm more suited for the Goddess role. Meanwhile, the peasant girl fits just right with someone meek like you. There's no arguing that."

It doesn't feel like she'll take a no or make any compromises. She can be quite commanding. Akane thought. She did have her share of thoughts on the matter; however, Kana-chan's expression was stern. Challenging her would go nowhere, not like Akane had any desire to do so in the first place. Therefore, just like Kana-chan proposed, Akane accepted taking the role of peasant girl. Kana-chan's demeanor showed traces of relief; the same went for Akane. With things settled, they went over the script together and took their first steps in practicing it.

Several minutes later, with a doting smile decorating her face, Kana-chan looked down towards Akane.

"What a delightful girl you truly are."

"M-My Goddess… Have you spoken to me?"

Akane staggered, falling on her back. She, in that instance, was an honest and kind-hearted "peasant girl" aged between 14 and 15 years old. Every day, while helping her parents with farm work, that pious young girl would, in devotion, diligently clean the Goddess's statue. That was the analysis on which Akane based her portrayal of the role.

Their practice was going so well, it didn't even feel like it was their first time doing such a thing together. It seemed all of Akane's previous apprehensions had been proven ill-founded.

If anything, Kana-chan's acting skills were deeply refined, not to mention how intuitive it was sharing a scene with her. From the timing in which she delivered her lines to how she conveyed emotions through her eye movements, her technique was exceptionally polished. Acting alongside her was orders of magnitude easier than with any other girl from *Hydrangea*.

"You hear my voice; that alone proves the chaste heart you carry. Across this entire village, there is not a single soul like you."

"I-Is that true…? But then, isn't it lonely to have no one else to talk to?"

Akane looked up, uttering the peasant girl's line.

"Is there anything I can do for you? I want to serve you, my Goddess, with all my being."

"This disposition of yours on its own is more than enough. As long as you continue to serve me with such diligence, you shall have my blessing."

Both girls had perfectly entered their characters and reached a high level of resonance. Akane could count on her fingers the number of times her rehearsals with someone else went so smoothly right from the get-go.

Kana-chan is astonishing, truly. Akane thought. Acting alongside her gave Akane a sense of steadiness, similar to what she had felt when sharing the stage with the two veteran actors in the first phase.

Once they finished enacting the first act, Kana-chan stated, "Let's take a small break," letting out a small sigh as some drops of sweat began to slowly pop on her forehead.

"Then, what do you think about our performance until now?"

Kana-chan glanced in Akane's direction.

"Now that you mention it… I really think you do an excellent job portraying a kind goddess. It's just that…"

"Just what?"

Kana-chan's eyes narrowed instantly, locking on to Akane, who stopped dead in her tracks, like a frog under a snake's gaze. Memories of when Kana-chan had screamed at

her in the past flashed, and she instinctively avoided eye contact.
“E-Eh, I mean… It’s nothing!”
“Uh?” Kana-chan furrowed her brow even harder. “What do you mean ‘It’s nothing’? You clearly noticed something; it’s as plain as the nose on your face.”
“R-Really…?”
“Haven’t I told you already that working while having reservations about each other doesn’t work? So go ahead, just get it off your chest.”
Kana-chan approached Akane until their faces were barely touching. She had a surprisingly dominant presence for her height. It appeared that being in the entertainment industry for as long as she could remember had really honed her ability to exert herself.
As Akane found herself cornered, having no idea how to escape, a voice came from the corners of the practice room.
“She’s right, you know; if you have something to say, just do it. It makes things easier.”
It was the voice of a man. Without a second thought, she diverted her attention in the voice’s direction and saw a stranger.
The boy appeared to be slightly older than Akane. He had a considerable height, wore glasses as well as a worn-out hoodie paired with jeans, and his messy hair, which blurred the line between styled and unstyled, completed his casual look. And yet, somehow, he felt faintly familiar.
The boy leaned his body over the wall while having his attention pinpointed on Akane and her partner.
Who’s this guy? How long has he been there? Is he even from Hydrangea?
Akane looked puzzled. In the middle of her confusion, Kana-chan pointed her finger towards the boy. “Ah!”
“You’re that actor that played the main character in *The Pianist of Shadows.*”
That hint was all that Akane needed for the memory to click in her mind.
“Taiki Himekawa-san!?”
“Hey yo.” In response to Akane’s words, the boy, Himekawa-san, greeted them in a lethargic manner, bowing his head and saying, “Nice to meet you.”
Taiki Himekawa was, among all promising young actors, the elite of the elite. His troupe,

the *Lala Lai Theatrical Company*, was so sought after that its plays would sell out for days in a row.

What's someone as popular as Himekawa-san doing here?

Kana-chan went ahead into questioning his motives.

"What are you doing here? Do you get some sick kick from spying on two elementary school girls, you creep?"

"Hey, Kana-chan, that's a bit—"

Not feeling an ounce of fear, Kana-chan uttered a remark so intense that Akane shrank back in fright. On the other side, Himekawa-san showed no signs of anger; he merely scratched the back of his head, saying, "No, you got it all wrong," and sighed.

"It's just that I had a talk with the representative of *Hydrangea*. That's why I showed up."

"Representative? Are you perhaps talking about Okamura-san?"

"Oh yeah, her name was something like that." Himekawa-san nodded while answering Akane's question. That same nod also indicated he had no intention of explaining exactly what he planned to discuss with Okamura-san.

Just why did he come here?

"Sadly, I wasn't able to find her." Himekawa-san shrugged his shoulders. "Then, while I was thinking of going back home, I came across something that looked interesting and decided to take a peek."

Something interesting? Is he talking about our practice for the audition? I was so focused on it that I couldn't even notice him watching us.

"Have you been watching our rehearsal?"

"From the very beginning."

"Weirdo!" Kana-chan stared at him with a fed-up face. "I don't see what is so fascinating about peeking at random strangers."

However, Himekawa-san's expression remained the same; he merely adjusted his glasses while saying, "Not really…"

"I don't mind seeing other people acting; that's just how I am. Plus, I was involved with Nijino-san's audition, so you aren't total strangers, at least to me."

"Eh?" Akane doubted her ears; *did he just say Nijino-san's name?*

Kana-chan had the same reaction; their initial response was to both glance at each

other.

“All that practice was for *The Doting Goddess,* right? The one for the second phase.”

“Correct.” Akane replied, nodding.

“So, do you also know about this script?”

“Yeah, I skimmed through it.”

“Also…” Himekawa-san glanced at Kana-chan before shifting his gaze back to Akane.

“Your Goddess sure is ridiculously kind, isn’t she?”

“Kind?”

“Excuse me?” Kana-chan leaned her head.

“What are you implying? What’s so bad about portraying the Goddess as kind?”

“Well, I ain’t saying it’s bad per se, it’s just…”

“Damn, what’s even the right word here?—It’s just that portraying the Goddess from that script as merely kind, how do I say it, things just don’t add up.”

“Add up?”

“How do I put it? Something about it rubs me the wrong way.”

After saying that, he murmured “oops” and covered his mouth.

“I said too much. Nijino might scold me for that. I better shut my mouth.”

“Uh? What’s the matter with you?”

Kana-chan intensely scowled at him, though it didn’t seem to bother him at all. He murmured, “I better go home,” while walking towards the exit. However, when he was about to leave, he uttered “Ah!” and looked in Akane’s direction.

“I forgot to tell you sooner; that thing you wanted to say, come clean about it. That’s basic etiquette when co-starring.”

Etiquette. Akane was caught off guard by that choice of word. It was exactly like Himekawa-san had said. Perhaps the reason for Kana-chan’s protest was because she, by holding back her thoughts, was essentially being rude.

“Understood.” Akane nodded.

Himekawa-san, not making it clear whether he had heard her response or not, waved his hand, saying, “See you then,” and left the room.

He seems so listless and difficult to grasp. And yet, he gives off this aura of a prodigy. Well, they say all top-tier actors are peculiar in their own way, and he certainly is no

exception.

“What was that?”

As the sounds of Himekawa-san’s footsteps gradually dwindled, a sour look took hold of Kana-chan’s face.

“What’s the matter with all that ‘The Goddess isn’t kind’ talk? What’s the point of giving advice if you’re going to be so vague?”

“Well.” Akane shook her head. “Maybe he meant there’s still some room for improvement in our approach. At least that was what I got out of what he said.”

“Uh?” Kana-chan frowned in reaction to Akane’s reply.

“What? So you did have a complaint!”

Being cornered by Kana-chan, Akane froze for a second.

No, backing down again is not a choice. As she changed her mind, Akane tightly clenched her fists. Kana-chan was an actress she would share the stage with; expressing what she had in mind was basic etiquette. That’s what Himekawa-san had warned her.

Akane took one deep breath and steeled herself.

“W-Well, it’s not exactly a complaint. But, I had a certain impression when reading the script.”

“A certain impression?” Kana-chan leaned her head.

“Yes.” Akane nodded while turning her head back, facing Kana-chan. She had finally plucked up the courage. She would express all of her thoughts in detail until her viewpoint was clear.

“Let me hear it…”

In the end, their talk would last until sunset.

That day would turn into a memory carved into Akane’s mind for the years to come. It was the first time Akane stuck to her guns while facing Kana-chan, their first heart-to-heart confrontation. If it were not for what happened there, neither Akane nor Kana-chan would be the women they are today.

People really can’t quite predict what life will throw at them.

Chapter 4

As March came, the cold showed no signs of easing; a constant, gentle, and freezing rain persisted to pour over the business district. On that day, Taiki Himekawa headed towards the same multi-purpose building in front of the station. Inside one of its halls, the second selection of Shuugo Nijino's audition took place.

On top of the stage, *The Doting Goddess* play unfolded through a performance carried by the pair of actresses Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi. Their presentation approached the end of its second act, a scene where the village had been engulfed by flames, and the background actors screamed in despair, "Please, save us!" "Run for your lives!"

In the midst of this chaos, the peasant girl kneeled, seeking salvation from the Goddess. "My Goddess, hear my prayer. At this rate, the village will be consumed by the flames; please, extend your hand and save us."

At the center of the stage, the peasant girl, interpreted by Riko Suzumi, desperately pleaded. Her costume was just a crude dress with an apron around the waist and soot that covered her whole body, revealing she had just desperately run away from the fire.

They really thought about even the minute details.

Riko held her two hands in front of her chest and bowed, ashen-faced.

That's a pretty realistic performance. Taiki admired from afar. In contrast to the first phase, where she didn't make any significant impression, it was evident now the effort she had put into preparing. She likely had rehearsed the script over and over again. The same could be said about her partner, Emily Takafuji, who played the Goddess.

"Unfortunately, saving this village is beyond my powers. Its destruction this very night is set in stone."

Her tone of voice was calm but imposing. She wore a white gown that gracefully adorned her silhouette, as well as a beaming golden tiara. Each and every movement she made had a sublime bearing of divine quality. To cast such a powerful presence while being no older than 13 years old was definitively an arduous undertaking.

"Dear heavens…" The peasant girl, played by Riko, looked as if life had left her body.

The way she portrayed an expression swallowed by despair was effective.
Then, Emily Takafuji directed a doting gaze.
“You are certainly a virtuous young girl. You have diligently served me, your Goddess; for that, I will extend my hand to save your life and your life only.”
Emily Takafuji faced the corner of the stage and pointed her finger in its direction.
“No danger will reach you in that path. Run in that direction, without glancing to the left or the right, until you reach a body of water. There, you will be safe from the flames.”
“I-I’m deeply grateful, my Goddess.”
Riko Suzumi, playing the peasant girl, stood up, thanking the Goddess, and began running towards the lower part of the stage. She covered her mouth while escaping, leaning her body forward, showing an effort to avoid the smoke. Another sign they had carefully planned the scene.
The curtains closed, indicating the end of the second act. Act three and the final scene were set to come after a short break.
Just like the first phase, Taiki sat down in one of the vacant seats right beside Shuugo Nijino, who looked at him and asked, “What do you think?”
“Those two girls pulled off a performance better than we anticipated, don’t you believe?”
“Yes, I guess so,” Taiki nodded. “Well, you can really see their experience on display. They didn’t tremble at any moment; the entire presentation went pretty smoothly.”
“You’re correct. Had this been your standard audition, they’d have gotten a passing mark.”
That simple remark made it clear that Nijino wasn’t fully satisfied with their performance.
This man really never settles for less, Taiki thought.
The curtains opened again; Emily Takafuji, the Goddess, stood at the center of the stage with a gentle expression. Black spots sprinkled across her face and dress revealed she had passed a whole night among the flames.
From the corners of the stage, Riko Suzumi, the peasant girl, came running in her direction, shouting, “My Goddess!”
“Are you okay?”
Riko Suzumi untied the apron around her waist and kneeled in front of the Goddess. She used it as a towel and began to tirelessly rub every inch of the body and face of the

Goddess.
“Ah, you’re so dirty.”
“Thank you. You truly possess a kind heart. I’m glad that at least you, of all people, survived.”
Emily Takafuji, in a very “Goddess” fashion, showed a gentle smile that brimmed with love. With that, she revealed to the peasant girl she had been the sole survivor of the village.
“What a pitiful girl. Yet, you may not have a single worry from now on. From this moment onwards, I will be your eternal protector.”
“M-My Goddess…”
“Calm down your heart. You mustn’t feel lonely ever again.”
Riko Suzumi leaned her body to the legs of the Goddess, clinging to them. Tears covered her face as she loudly cried out of joy and relief.
“Yes. From now on, I may serve you forever, never leaving your side.”
Emily Takafuji continued to show that ever-present, doting smile as she gently patted Riko Suzumi’s back. A sight truly fitting of a story called *The Doting Goddess.*
The curtains closed in front of them, bringing the third act to its end. Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi had both been able to carry out their performances to the very end without any noticeable mistakes.
Nijino, sitting beside Taiki, clapped his hands.
“They did an excellent job; I can say for sure their performance was dutifully committed to the script. That they’re outstanding actresses for their generation is undeniable.”
“However, just ‘outstanding’ doesn’t cut it for you, right, Nijino-san?”
“Precisely,” Nijino replied as a smile filled with a cunning sense of joy appeared on his face.
“I’d prefer to see a performance that truly goes beyond, if possible. Something that shatters what we thought possible. That’s a selfish desire, I might say, but one I believe everyone that engages with theater carries.”
“Well, I can’t wait to see what those two have in store.”
Taiki shifted his attention back to the stage, where the props of the third act were one by one replaced by the ones for the first act. A new pair, Kana Arima and Akane Kurokawa,

were about to begin their presentation.

A few moments before that, Kana Arima was preparing for the audition in the waiting room.

With her costume fully on, she took her hand mirror, evenly spread the lipstick, and smacked her lips together.

Doing my own make-up is muscle memory by this point. She thought to herself.

A few years ago, she could just leave the task to the very best stylists, but things weren't so simple anymore; with her fall from grace, it eventually became a common occurrence for her to handle her own make-up and costumes. And, of course, this audition would be no different. She had stepped in as a contestant; therefore, she would need to brace herself with her very hands.

It's frustrating, but that's my life now. The only path is forward; bring it on. Kana fired herself up.

Stealing a glance at the desk beside her, Akane was looking at all the cosmetics lined up in front of her, seemingly having no clue what to do with them. The screen of the smartphone she held in one of her hands showed the text "How to apply make-up on the cheeks for stage?" It seemed she was trying to learn it on the spot.

"Oh my, what do I do with her?"

Kana sighed and began moving her seat right in front of Akane.

"That's enough; just give me the cosmetics. I'll do it for you."

"Eh?" For a brief moment, Akane was taken by surprise but quickly composed herself and nodded in agreement, although faintly embarrassed and with an awkward smile.

"Yes, I guess it's for the best; you can go ahead, Kana-chan."

"Great that you understand. And well, this make-up sure is quite complicated for beginners."

Kana took the brush and the foundation and began to apply it to Akane's face, carefully making sure to spread it evenly.

All that talk, but as much as it irks me to say it, this girl is gorgeous. As she got close to

Akane, her face within arm's reach, those thoughts began popping into Kana's mind. Her eyebrows and nose were dainty, paired with delicate cheeks. Simply put, she was stunning; it was almost like her face had been built to dazzle audiences from the stage. All that theater make-up was made to stand out under the spotlight, making the actors' facial features pop on the stage. However, she was now questioning herself on whether this would have been even necessary in that sculpted-like face.

And as if that wasn't enough, she also had long, slender limbs and a fine figure. Her looks went beyond an actress and reached model territory. *Looks like God does pick favorites.*

"This isn't fair…"

Kana ended up thinking out loud. Akane reacted, confused, "Eh?"

"I-I'm sorry, Kana-chan. It really is unfair for me to just use your help with make-up and not do anything in return."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Damn it," Kana muttered. As if being gorgeous wasn't enough, Akane was also, to her very essence, a very virtuous person. Kana was sure that girl and she were poles apart, a perception that irked her to a fault.

I'm sure she's a real head-turner. Kana thought for an instant. *Akane Kurokawa is beautiful, smart, and has a good heart. I can't seem to find a single point to nitpick. Honestly, the last thing I'd ever want is to have a girl like her as a romantic rival.*

"Thinking about it…" Kana said as she applied make-up on Akane's cheek.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Huh?" At that very moment, Akane raised her voice in a rather eccentric way.

"A-A-A boyfriend? Of course not! I—I'm just twelve!"

"So what? It's not that uncommon for a girl our age to have a boyfriend these days."

"Really?" Akane froze in place in reaction to Kana's statement.

Of course, Akane was as sheltered of a girl as her demeanor would lead you to believe. The very idea of getting a boy was fully foreign to her. That confirmation made Kana feel slightly relieved.

As Kana raised her chin, Akane took the opportunity to ask, "And what about you, Kana-chan?"

“Well, I also have none.” Kana instantly responded.
“But, I do see my work as a type of lover.”
“Work?” Akane looked confused. “Wait, I thought you were getting barely any work recently, or was I wrong?”
Akane’s artless comment struck a nerve. Kana pulled a wry look, saying, “Yeah, awful, right?”
Akane those past few days, for better or worse, wasn’t mincing her words. Likely a result of how, on that day, in the practice room inside *Hydrangea*, they both spilled their guts. Ever since then, she, in contrast to before, would say whatever she wanted to say when talking to Kana.
“Then…” Akane continued.
“Is there any boy who caught your attention?”
“No, not a single one.”
Kana shook her head, a detail that Akane tightly noticed; her eyes were as sharp as a detective in an interrogation.
“Really? Because you look like you’re lying. Do you actually not have a boy you’re interested in?”
“No, I don’t have it; I mean it.”
That was what she said out loud, but the truth was that, deep down, there was a boy who had caught Kana’s interest: a child actor she had met once a long time ago. Setting aside terms like “love” or “affection,” that boy was, primarily, the one person that popped in her mind when thinking about the subject of “a boy who caught her attention.” To this day, she kept wondering if he still was in the acting industry.
“Hmn… From your reaction, it seems he’s someone you haven’t met in a while. Could it be that this guy that you’re interested in is a childhood friend or something like that?”
Akane’s question made Kana’s heart skip a beat. *This girl sure is shrewd; where did she even learn to be this savvy?*
“T—That isn’t the case…”
The moment Kana saw herself cornered, a sound came from outside the waiting room.
“Oh my gosh, our performance up there was perfect.”

“Totally, it’s already clear as day that one of us will win. I almost feel bad for those two.”
It was Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi; with their presentation seemingly over, they chatted in the same easygoing manner as always while entering the waiting room.
There, Emily’s eyes turned to face Kana and Akane.
“Now, it’s your turn. Remember, doing your best is what truly matters.”
She was overflowing with confidence, smiling with the certainty of already having won.
Kana instinctively felt a bad taste in her mouth, cringing inside.
Just a bit of fame was enough to go all the way up to her head, a phenomenon that could happen to any actor, no matter the place. Kana could see traces of her past self in Emily, something that brought a faint sense of secondhand embarrassment.
Well, just avoid giving her what she wants. For that reason, Kana tried to ignore Emily, only for Akane to suddenly open her mouth.
“Yes, we’ll do our best. That’s why our performance will be better than yours.”
Without the slightest trace of hesitation or restraint, Akane asserted herself. She cheerfully and honestly smiled while gazing directly at Emily Takafuji.
Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi’s jaws dropped like they had seen a ghost. They couldn’t fathom the idea of Akane being so cut-and-dry.
It’s like she is a whole new person. Kana thought. That meek and easily wavered girl now had the look of a prominent actress. Over the past month, she had finally broken out of her shell.
And of course, she wasn’t the only one who had changed. Kana herself had her realization.
“Oh my, you got some dirty mouth there. You better straighten that personality of yours unless you want to be put aside in this industry.”
“Hey, I have a good personality.”
Akane said, pouting. But it felt very artificial, like she was merely posing the type of immature reaction someone would expect of a child her age.
“Yeah, that’s totally what people with good personalities say.” Kana responded while gazing at Akane with an exasperated expression.
She found clapping back and forth with Akane quite amusing. Glancing at Emily and Riko, Kana let out a daring laugh.

“We’ll show what an actual perfect performance looks like.”

Ten minutes later, the staff member’s voice came across the theater hall.
“The next presentation will be by Akane Kurokawa-san and Kana Arima-san. Please welcome them.”
The day has finally come. Taiki Himekawa straightened his posture. He was thrilled to watch the audition today, especially for their performance.
Of course, Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi’s presentation wasn’t bad by any means. However, the one thing he was personally interested in watching was the pairing of Akane Kurokawa and Kana Arima.
Last month, when he took a peek at their acting in the practice room of *Hydrangea*, they were seemingly going with a conservative interpretation. The same approach the previous pair had just used.
Did they find a way to push their performance further? Considering how they approached the first phase, he had a certain optimism that they would somehow defy his expectations.
Sitting beside him, Nijino murmured, “I’m looking forward to this,” his excitement clearly visible.
“Akane Kurokawa-san, a possessed type, and Kana Arima-san, an assertive type. I just can’t imagine what two actresses with such contrasting traits are able to produce together. Could it be a stunning display or even a whole fiasco? Who knows?”
“You’re making a big bet, in a way.”
“Yes. Pairing them together sure was a risky move, but every so often you have to take your chances to get something truly worthwhile.”
Nijino directed his attention to the stage; his eyes sparkled with a boyish exuberance.
“Very well, the curtains are opening.”
The thick curtains gradually opened, revealing the stage. *The Doting Goddess* began its first act with the statue of the Goddess placed on the outskirts of the village.
When the lights focused on the middle of the stage, Taiki was startled. Standing still,

there was Akane Kurokawa. When he saw them last month, she was playing the role of peasant girl, which could only mean their plans had changed. Now, Akane was the Goddess, positioned at the center.

And yet, the thing that surprised Taiki the most wasn't the exchange of roles; the choice for her dress was something he hadn't seen coming.

"What's that dress?"

Akane Kurokawa was wearing a pitch-black dress. Covered with a gothic-inspired black lace, the dress emanated an otherworldly and nefarious aura. The difference from the previous white-dressed Goddess Emily Takafuji had just played was night and day.

Kneeling beside that dark Goddess, the peasant girl, played by Kana Arima, diligently polished the statue with a piece of cloth.

"Ah, how could they even let such a beautiful face be coated in dirt?"

"I better do my best to clean it. You, my Goddess, are always watching over us after all."

Kana Arima hummed while devoting herself to cleaning the Goddess.

"Everyone may make a fool out of me for this, but you're the patroness of this village, right, my Goddess? If we don't show the devotion you deserve, divine hand will certainly come to strike us."

In that instant, the Goddess, Akane Kurokawa, looked down towards the peasant girl and lifted the corners of her mouth, grinning.

"What a delightful girl you truly are."

Seeing that grin made Taiki instantly feel chills down his spine while breaking a cold sweat. *Frightening.*

The first feeling that came to him was dread. That grin on her face would do the same to anyone who noticed it. Its very nature diverged from Emily Takafuji's interpretation of the Goddess.

However, Kana Arima, the peasant girl, continued to act as if the wickedness in that grin had flown over her head. She smiled brightly, pure of any doubts, while directing a look of worship towards the Goddess, gorging the scene with an uncanny feeling.

Beside Taiki, Nijino let out a small chuckle. "Ho-ho…"

"Somehow, those girls seem to have met my expectations."

"Expectation?"

“Just keep watching.”
What are these girls trying to portray on the stage? Before he noticed, Taiki’s eyes were glued to the play.

The peasant girl, Kana-chan, raised her eyes, intently looking at the Goddess, Akane.
“M-My Goddess… Have you spoken to me?”
“You hear my voice; that alone proves the chaste heart you carry. Across this entire village, there is not a single soul like you.”
Akane gazed towards Kana-chan, displaying a doting smile. In body and soul, she was the Goddess, an old deity that had long been forgotten by the village and currently interacted with the peasant girl.
Living a purely solitary life for all that time, the Goddess found in the peasant girl the sole person she could bond with. So, what if the feelings the lonely Goddess held towards the peasant girl didn’t stop at simple kindness?
That was what Akane tried to explain to Kana-chan that day.

“A certain impression…?”
Inside the practice room of *Hydrangea*, Kana-chan questioned Akane.
This was back on the day Himekawa-san had visited the practice room, taking a peek at their rehearsal and, after saying something about things not adding up in the script, returned home.
At that moment, Akane also shared the same impression as him. She had inferred a certain subtext inside the story. So, she nodded towards a puzzled Kana-chan, “Yes.”
“This story, don’t you think that in essence, it is a terribly cruel tale?”
“Cruel?” Kana-chan tilted her head.
“What do you mean? Isn’t the peasant girl rewarded in the end for honestly serving the Goddess with all her strength? Meanwhile, all the village members who neglected the Goddess ended up getting punished. It’s your typical fable to teach a moral lesson that even a small child could understand. What part of that is ‘cruel’?”

“Well, that’s certainly a way to interpret it.”
Akane stated while opening the script.
“Can we really say the peasant girl was rewarded in the end?”
“Huh?”
“I mean, all the other villagers burned to death, right? Don’t you think her being the sole survivor of her hometown would be heart-rending?”
Kana-chan frowned after hearing Akane. She touched her chin while taking her time to think.
“Well, yes… I guess.”
“When Himekawa-san mentioned he didn’t see the Goddess as simply kind, I think this was what he was referring to. She had more than plain good intentions when she miraculously saved the peasant girl.”
“More than plain good intentions?” Kana-chan carefully pondered over Akane’s statement. “Then, for what?”
“It’s just my opinion, but I imagine the Goddess wanted to monopolize the peasant girl.”
“Monopolize?” Kana-chan responded, incredulous.
However, Akane could not interpret the story in any other way.
The peasant girl was the single most important thing from the Goddess perspective. It didn’t just stop at the fact she was the only person the Goddess could bond with. The girl was the only human that would blindly listen and follow her no matter what.
The Goddess schemed to have the peasant girl be completely in her hands. Therefore, she caused the fire in act two and used the idea of purging the evil of the other villagers as a pretext to make the peasant girl hers and hers alone.
“By doing that, she was able to brainwash the peasant girl into thinking of her as an ally while having her in the palm of her hands. Her actions look more like those of a demon than a goddess.”
“Yeah, you do have a point.”
Kana-chan remained grim.
“Now that you mention it, this feels exactly like the type of thing Shuugo Nijino would write. That old man adores this type of sardonic way of analyzing stories.”
“Right?” Akane showed a wry smile. Look at the title, *The Doting Goddess.* It seems

made to deceive the reader. It is indeed a story about love, but a story about a twisted and narcissistic love.

“Saying it out loud, yeah, it all seems to line up.” Kana audibly sighed. “Just like you said, this is a really cruel tale.”

What at first seemed a standard fable showed an entirely different side when closely assessed. Almost like the mischievous feelings of whoever wrote it bit by bit revealed themselves.

“And for that reason…” Akane, fighting against the intense anxiety inside, continued, “I believe it should be you who plays the peasant girl, not me.”

“What?”

Kana-chan tilted her head again with her face perplexed. *What’s this girl trying to say?*

Kana Arima and Akane Kurokawa’s audition entered its second act.

In the scene where the village is engulfed in flames and its inhabitants scream in despair, the peasant girl, played by Kana, desperately tries to escape.

“A-Ah! I need to get to the Goddess as fast as I can.”

Kana came running from the corners of the stage almost without breath. She only had eyes for the Goddess, refusing to deviate them to the right or the left; the Goddess was more important than the village and her family. All aspects of Kana’s body language showcased the peasant girl's damned devotion.

She at last reached the statue and prostrated herself.

“My Goddess, hear my prayer. At this rate, the village will be consumed by the flames; please, extend your hand and save us.”

“Unfortunately, saving this village is beyond my powers. Its destruction this very night is set in stone.”

Akane Kurokawa, covered in her black garment, proclaimed in an unearthly tone. The movements of her lips displayed a tinge of a grin, letting on her true desires. That grin leaked her morbid joy, “And with that, you’ll be all mine,” before quickly vanishing.

Akane’s acting was of an expert level. Even Kana’s eyes sometimes confused the girl in

front of her for an actual wicked goddess. Almost like the stage had taken away that constantly docile girl and given birth to a whole new person. *I can see how much you adore acting,* Kana thought.

Here, being praised by other people or receiving money couldn't matter less to this girl. It was a simple truth: Akane Kurokawa adored acting; she would dive headfirst into any role given to her.

Honestly, I envy her. I have no doubts that Akane will become an actress beloved by everyone. That, presumably, would be the opposite fate of Kana.

"You are certainly a virtuous young girl." Akane looked down at Kana. "You have diligently served me, your Goddess; for that, I will extend my hand to save your life and your life only."

Akane donned a serene smile, pointing towards the edge of the stage.

"No danger will reach you in that path. Run in that direction without looking to the side until you reach a body of water. There, you will be safe from the flames."

"I-I'm deeply grateful, my Goddess."

Kana did exactly as the Goddess told her; she began running and never once doubted her words.

It's just so wretched, Kana thought. *This peasant girl, she has no idea the Goddess treats her as no more than a tool to satisfy her own narcissistic love. Like a damned fool, she keeps putting her faith in the Goddess as the only one who can save her. It's maddening how much it feels like looking at a mirror. And to think how offended I felt when that girl pointed this out.*

"I believe it should be you who plays the peasant girl, not me."

"What?" Three weeks ago, during their exchange in the *Hydrangea* practice room, Kana tilted her head after hearing those words. Why would Akane suggest she play the peasant girl? It didn't make sense to her.

"Yeah, I can totally see your point on the Goddess's intentions being to take the peasant girl all for herself. But then, why should I play the peasant girl?"

"Well…" Akane tried to express herself only to stop mid-sentence, clearly wavering as she continued to fix her gaze on Kana. However, that only lasted a few seconds; she

braced herself and opened her mouth.
“Because you’re a marionette… Just like this peasant girl.”
“Marionette?”
Akane’s words didn’t make an ounce of sense to Kana, who merely showed a perplexed look; Akane continued keeping the same stern expression.
“It’s your mom; she has been using you like her marionette, Kana-chan.”
Me? A marionette for Mom? What the hell is this girl talking about?
“Hey, wait one second, what are you trying to imply?”
“That’s the reason you've been burning yourself out doing whatever you can in this industry, isn’t it, Kana-chan? The reason you were even forcing yourself to take part in rigged auditions. It wasn’t because of money or fame; it was all because your mom told you so, isn’t that the case?”
“A-Ah…”
Suddenly, under that look, Kana felt as if something had cracked inside of her mind.
“And what the hell do you even know about me? Quit spouting nonsense and stay in your lane.”
But Kana’s raised tone had no effect on Akane; she remained calm and nodded.
“But I do know. I’ve researched it.”
“Researched?”
“I was eager to know more about you, Kana-chan. So I went around asking numerous people. I started with other girls from your former agency and staff members from TV programs you worked on. And for whatever possible lead I’d notice in those talks, I’d try asking them too.”
Dad taught me that to gather information, you must make good use of whatever lead comes along your way. Akane continued.
“And that’s when I finally realized that your mom has been constantly butting into your work, Kana-chan. That’s why you’ve been taking jobs in music and variety programs, isn’t it? You just kept working with no choice in the matter while paying attention to how she’d react.”
Kana gulped in reaction. That girl had an assiduity nobody would expect to find in a child.

On one side, it was certainly possible to learn about her and her mom by taking the time to look into it. However, how was it even possible for a mere 12-year-old girl, someone just as old as Kana, to have uncovered all that in so little time? After all, they had just met for the first time; it's not like they have known each other for long.

This girl, Akane Kurokawa, I completely took her for your average honest and docile girl, but I couldn't have been more wrong. If anything, she makes my skin crawl.

"A-Are you for real? Do you realize that's stalker behavior? Why would you even go that far—"

"I said it already; I was eager to learn more. This audition meant that we'd share the same stage and perform together. So, I focused on finding out what was troubling you so much because I wanted to be someone who could help you."

"Mind your own business." Kana harshly rebuked.

I'm perfectly capable of handling my own problems. I even went as far as to kneel myself to the ground to get into this audition.

Not to mention, everything involving Mom is between her and me and nobody else.

"You don't understand me at all. I don't work because of Mom or anything like that. I do it all out of my own volition; I work only for myself."

"Yes, that may look to be the case from your perspective." Akane proceeded, her expression not deviating in the slightest, "The peasant girl from this play would surely give the same answer, something like 'I'm the one looking after the Goddess; it was my choice; it's not as if she's coercing me into doing anything.'"

"What are you implying?"

"Kana-chan, the grasp she has over you goes to the deepest corners of your heart. Just like the peasant girl, you have been made a marionette; you haven't been living for your own sake."

Akane's unsparing and unembellished words once again caused an intense burning sensation inside Kana's mind. Almost as if dark flames had begun consuming her brain. She grabbed Akane by the collar in exasperation.

"What's your deal? Do you like making a fool of others? Stop it!"

"You're angry because it hits close to home, right? You can infer a lot about a person based on what they like and what makes them angry."

Her eyes burned with the intensity and darkness of dusk as they silently pierced through Kana. They neither showed any intention of condemning her nor displayed pity. The girl simply continued to stare at her with an unreadable and dispassionate expression.
“You’re so kind, Kana-chan. And it’s because of that kindness that you keep striving to be the ‘Kana-chan’ that your mom desires. That's why you suppressed the part of you that cherished acting, and began to desperately push yourself in music, variety TV, or other jobs that came your way.”
What Akane had just said, amidst its oddity, was correct. For that reason, Kana furiously clenched her hands in frustration, trying to mask her feelings.
There was no single thing that she was more eager to do than acting. The stage was where she could confess her emotions without having to worry about anyone else’s opinion. How good it would have been if she could have just dedicated herself to the genuine craft she had polished. But the world wasn’t that perfect of a place; things don't always go as one hopes. She had to remain silent and swallow the dirt thrown at her.
And yet, for some reason, *this girl…*
At that moment, reflecting on the situation she found herself in, an old memory resurfaced in Kana’s mind.

“That man, he was saying weird things, something about this audition being set up for you to win, Kana-chan.”
Those were the words she had heard from a girl a long time ago. She was around the same age as Kana, but beyond that, she also had the same hairstyle and wore a similar beret. It was a sight far from rare among child actresses: a fan of Kana Arima.
Kana ran into her back when she herself was much younger; it all happened during an audition for the role in a TV drama in which Kana was participating. That same audition was just for show. From the start, it had already been decided between the TV station and Kana’s agency that she would get the spot.
To put it bluntly, it was rigged.
At that moment, the girl, completely unaware of this fact, tried talking to Kana. One vivid memory is how sour the whole ordeal felt for her.
The first reason was because Kana herself loathed the idea of a rigged audition. Her

pride couldn't bear the thought of taking a role like that.

I strive to improve. Kana took pride in that fact. *While everyone else in school enjoys the playground, I keep training. I persist through all the failures, disappointments, and successes I accumulated along the way. All of that is to be able to move other people's hearts; it's for my acting.*

An audition is where I can put all of that to the test. A place where my efforts are validated or not. Failing one is the same as having my efforts dismissed. It's like being looked down on.

Mom, after taking a look at Ai Hoshino, had once said.

"Look at that, Kana-chan, that woman only got this role because of connections. There's no need for an outstanding actress like you to adopt any actions from the filthy likes of her."

That was back in the "Genius Child Actress Kana-chan" days, back when Kana was successful, back when Mom was kind.

However, years went by and Kana's work opportunities dwindled, with Mom changing at the same rate. She, who once repudiated making use of connections, began bringing offers of rigged auditions to Kana.

That was when she realized her mom from the past no longer existed.

"Very well, Kana-chan. What matters the most for TV stations isn't a good actress, but a popular one."

"I've managed to get this gift of a job just for you, Kana-chan. Don't waste it."

The way she said those things left no room for Kana to turn them down. *Don't whine about it. Don't hurt Mom. Stick to her. You have to.*

Of course, the other seats in the audition's venue were filled with other girls. They needed to invite them in order to at least give the illusion of an actual audition.

And some of those girls were alongside their parents.

A girl with an attire that mirrored Kana's had come to the venue alongside her mom. They cheerfully held hands and rejoiced, like a family at a picnic.

That girl's mom kindly smiled at her daughter.

"Don't forget to have fun acting."

"Like I said, it doesn't matter whether you pass or not as long as you have fun."

Being reminded by her mom, the girl bubbly nodded in agreement. That smile was so pure, she probably had never heard her mom aggressively yelling at her.

I'm sure their dinner table must feel so warm.

And yet, a girl that happy was there, imitating her, idolizing her. How utterly ironic.

Nothing good can come from imitating the likes of me.

Kana had stained an audition, turned her back on her passion, acting, and became a marionette that paid attention to how her mom would react. Even going as far as taking the rigged audition that she despised so much.

The emotional turmoil that Kana felt that day was of a level she couldn't properly put into words.

"That man, he was saying weird things, something about this audition being set up for you to win. But that's just a misunderstanding, isn't it? You would never do something so dirty, right, Kana-chan?

What an innocent face she made while asking that. She should've already known by that point that this was an industry that turned a blind eye to things like that.

"And what if I did?"

Her face froze.

That's the type of battlefield you're throwing yourself towards: an industry run on self-interest where cowards thrive. You can't survive this world without knowing that, so I'm teaching you a lesson: This is a rigged industry.

"Kana-chan, are you fine with that?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I be? I get jobs that way."

No. No. Nothing justifies this.

And yet, my mouth says the opposite of what I believe.

If I try to deny it, then what am I even doing after all?

I already gave up on my pride to do something so pathetic; what am I? Or Mom?

I have to play along. I'm already more of a product than an actual artist anyway.

Just make the job go smoothly; find a way to walk around the ugly parts. In the end, I'm just here to sell.

Don't say anything; just cave in. That's the only path forward for me, my only choice.

"Nobody gives a damn about acting."

She denied what she treasured the most.

Those exact words were something Mom had yelled at her one day. She violently repeated those same words that had once torn her heart in half, trying to appeal to herself.

She would rather not look the girl in the eye. *How sincere she is, how authentically she seems to cherish acting, like I once did. She has the same eyes I once had, the eyes of someone who never imagined taking this dirty path.*

“There’s something wrong, right?”

She talked as if she were trying to persuade Kana.

“You don’t really believe in those things, right?”

Again with those eyes. Those idolizing and begging eyes. How much of a fool can you be? This girl is a lost cause.

I already stopped getting jobs for being a terrible person; all my pride also went to the trash. What do you think you’ll get by worshipping a money-sniffing dog like me?

Kana smacked the girl’s hat off.

That was the symbol of the “Genius Child Actress, Kana Arima,” the emblem of that girl’s adulation. Kana negated what it stood for.

“I hate your kind the most.”

The target of those furious words wasn’t that girl, but Kana herself.

She hated people like her the most.

Don’t even try being like me. Don’t come here. This ordeal isn’t worth it.

There’s no happiness here. Stay where you are. Keep walking in your path.

Those were the heated emotions she felt towards the girl that day.

She envied the happy life the girl seemed to have.

That was her form of kindness as a veteran in the industry.

Her despair over having no way back.

“Quit imitating me!”

After saying that, the girl became wholly silent. Kana gulped for a moment, turned her back on her, and began walking. The girl’s face was covered in tears; Kana was desperately holding back hers.

That girl’s mom is probably so kind. I imagine she doesn’t try to put pressure on her

while angry.
I bet that after finishing the audition, she hugged her so gently. While in my case, all I would get for failing is unbearable frustration, feeling sad to the point of wanting to shout, and the desire to get at least a hug from anyone.
Why, why can't Mom love me?

Kana could feel all the bitter memories of that time strongly emerging again in her heart.
“All that talk over not caring about acting. It was all a lie, wasn’t it?”
The young girl standing in front of her very eyes—Akane Kurokawa—was no longer someone that would take Kana’s words lying down.
“Yes. I put on a facade that day. But again, there was no other way.”
Kana resolutely stared at Akane.
“So what if I’d rather have been acting? That bombed, so I did what I had to do. After all, it was my fault that Kana Arima became a flop. It wasn’t anyone else’s fault. I had no right even trying to pretend otherwise. From the very beginning, it was always my fault.”
“Is that really true? Was it really all your fault, Kana?”
“Uh?”
“Was it really only your fault that your work dwindled?”
“What are you insinuating?” Kana snorted.
“And is there room for arguing? I let fame get to my head and acted like a brat until almost every corner of the industry wanted nothing to do with me. Nobody has any use for me anymore, simple as that.”
“Yes, I know that.” Akane nodded.
“But, it’s not your fault that you became a black sheep in the industry.”
“Uh, what makes you so sure about that?”
“It’s a natural conclusion after talking to so many people. To be more precise, it wasn’t you who they wanted to avoid; it was your mom.
Kana stayed silent, but the girl’s words did ring a bell inside of her.
Akane continued to explain with the same dispassionate expression.
“Your mom seemed to be the type who couldn’t stop herself from constantly poking her nose into your work environments. All the time she was meddling with the agency’s

plans, complaining to the directors, picking fights with TV station producers, and so on. In other words, a stage mother. And from the looks of it, she has been like that for quite a while."

"That… That's just because Mom wants what's best for me."

"Her intentions in the beginning might've been something akin to that. But I've read books that describe situations across the world where parents try to control their child's actions while, deep down, wanting solely to satisfy their wishes. They insist on saying, 'It's for my kid,' while pushing their children around as they see fit, projecting their unfilled dreams onto them. There's one term for individuals like that: toxic parents."

Kana had no response. "Pushing their children around as they see fit, projecting their unfilled dreams onto them"—that sounded just like Mom.

"But anyway," Akane continued.

"Your mom's actions clearly crossed the line. Staff members naturally started to view her as a pain in the neck. I would rather not have to say this, but the reason the idea that 'Kana Arima is difficult to work with' spread so much is, in my opinion, almost entirely her fault."

Kana remained silent but intently glared at Akane. However, Akane didn't tremble or avoid eye contact. She took it all without wavering.

Even Kana had realized those things before. Mom eventually gained the reputation of being a troublemaker. She could recall how people of the agency and TV staff members showed signs of being fed up with her antics.

However, Kana, due to the guilt of having snatched away Mom's dreams, looked the other way. If only she didn't exist, Mom might have had a good chance of hitting it big inside the industry. Thinking about it, she already had a history of not asserting herself.

"But she's not all at fault. Everyone complained about how repulsive and selfishly I treated the people around me when I was younger."

"But even so, didn't you get this attitude from her? Children are constantly observing their parents' behavior. Don't you think that you considered that type of egocentric behavior normal because you saw her doing it?"

That's not… She could not refute it. There wasn't a single wrong in what Akane had just said.

When she was a small child, the main reason she acted so selfish without a care in the world was because she thought that was how things worked. She was imitating Mom. What could be wrong with that? Only to eventually become ostracized by numerous people; that was a distinctly distressing memory.

“It felt awful, didn't it?” Akane softened her expression.

“Because of your mom’s actions, you became more and more isolated. Even your father left the house from what I heard, although no one in the agency was very direct about that. You couldn’t turn to anyone; no wonder your only option was to cling to her.”

“And what about that matters to you anyway?”

Kana interrupted Akane.

“Yeah, I was dealt the worst cards in life. I don’t need anyone telling me that. What do you want with this? Is pushing me up against the wall amusing to you?”

“Not at all; I had no intention of putting any pressure on you. It’s not like I could interfere in your relationship with your mom. I just wanted to inform you that you can use that to your advantage.”

“To my advantage?” Kana tilted her head.

For a brief moment she seemed completely lost. But then the realization came. Akane had told her she was a marionette, just like the peasant girl of the story.

“So, what you have been trying to tell me is that I should play the peasant girl because I can use my life experiences in my acting?”

“Yes.” Akane nodded, the same neutral expression on her face. “You’re like the peasant girl, crying all alone, having no choice but to cling to the motherly Goddess.”

“You do love saying these things with so much certainty in your face, don’t you?”

“Yes, after all, that’s what I learned. I researched so much about you and took every second necessary to reflect on each detail. If anything, sometimes I even think I might understand how you feel better than I ever understood my own feelings.”

Akane spoke in a joking manner, letting out a faint chuckle.

“You already have everything necessary to prepare for the role. I believe you should make the most out of it.”

“Make the most out of it? You…”

Kana’s face instinctively shifted to a shocked expression. When talking about her

circumstances, Akane showed no pity, nor did she criticize Kana in any manner; all she did was suggest that Kana use her circumstances to make her own acting flourish.
Oh, I get it now. Kana finally reached a realization. *This girl, she's a theater freak.*
Kana already had a hunch when observing her in the first phase; Akane looked like an honorable and model student on the outside, but she seemed to have a few screws loose. *Her mindset is all nuts.*
"Not to mention…" Akane continued. "I suspect this theme was picked specially for you, Kana-chan."
"For me?"
"Anything is possible when Shuugo Nijino is involved. I wouldn't doubt that he, knowing about your situation, set this script with the intention that you'd burst yourself open with it."
The idea made sense to Kana. The possibility of all of that having been set up was within reason considering the sardonic director they were talking about.
"But." Kana avoided directly looking at Akane. "I can't play the peasant girl. My role needs to be the Goddess."
"And why is that?"
Kana shut her mouth to Akane's question. If she were to explain her reasoning, it would have been the same as admitting defeat, proving all of Akane's conclusions true. However, staying silent merely did the same thing; a girl as clever as Akane could read her emotions at that moment like an open book.
"Was it because your mom told you to do so? Because she thought this role stood out more?"
To an observation that precise, Kana's only option was to nod, saying, "Y-Yes…"
"I-I can't fail her again. I need to do like she said. I don't want to hurt her anymore."
"Is that so?" Akane lightly sighed.
"I guess in your case it really is more important to avoid her anger than having a great performance."
Akane's words pierced Kana and gouged her heart like a sharp blade. Why did it hurt so much? She knew the answer. *My acting, my mother…* That was one elephant in the room Kana was avoiding.

“It’s scary, right? Going against your mother is probably terrifying; I can imagine why you’d rather never hear her yelling at you again.”
Akane’s mouth had no brakes anymore. Her shy aura from when they first met was long gone. Now, she was no longer measuring her words.
She analyzed every last bit of another person and dissected their heart. Could it be that she tried to connect with others like this before?
“The idea of cutting ties with her probably sounds absolutely terrifying…”
However, Kana thought.
Among everything she said, this girl committed one fatal flaw.

Kana-chan shook her shoulders, laughing, “Ha-ha-ha.”
What’s going on? Akane Kurokawa tried to examine Kana-chan’s face, only for her to suddenly raise her voice, laughing even harder, “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”
Behind her laughter was a clear resentment. Akane instinctively gulped.
“Dear God! You really don’t have a single damn clue!”
Kana loudly sighed; her expression sharpened. Her unnerving eyes locked onto Akane, filled with a mix of disappointment and scorn.
“So you thought you could understand other people digging up information about them?”
“Eh?”
“Like you said…” Kana-chan snorted, “Mom sure can be a bit messed up sometimes. The way she caused so much trouble to those around her, how she ended up ostracized by them, and especially how, after all that, she was still firmly convinced of being in the right.”
“But, if that’s the case—”
Before Akane could finish, Kana-chan interrupted her. “However!”
“You were right about her, and that’s it. You don’t have a clue about me; you're just under the illusion you do.”
“An illusion? What do you mean by that?”

Akane didn't let herself crumble under the pressure and urgently asserted herself. When trying to research Kana-chan, she exhausted every source she could find. She surveyed countless people and compiled information in her own way. Therefore, how could her conclusion that Kana-chan was forced into a position where she couldn't defy her mother be wrong?

"I paid very close attention to everything Dad told me about profiling. It's an objective analytical method based on statisti—"

"Oh, profiling then?"

Kana-chan's eyes narrowed, and she coldly stared at her.

"So it's based on that profiling thing you got that idea that I'm a poor girl scared of Mommy and that everything bad about my personality is her fault?"

"Then?" Kana-chan cornered Akane. She glared at her with a gaze as sharp as a knife.

"And the result you got from that is I stick to Mom because of how scared I am of her."

"Yes." Akane tried to nod in response, but Kana-chan raised her voice before she had the chance.

"How big of a moron are you?"

Kana-chan's shout reverberated across the room. Her threatening look made Akane's whole body tremble.

"Things aren't that simple. Human beings aren't that hollow."

Kana-chan suddenly grabbed Akane tightly.

"You truly don't know a thing. Let me guess. Your family is so kind. Every time you need help, they're there for you. Every night all of you enjoy a nice stew at the table. How wonderful, isn't it? To never even feel your heart starving for a crumb of affection."

"About that—"

"Someone like you could never, ever understand how I feel!"

Akane couldn't rebut Kana-chan's claim. She had never stopped to carefully consider that side of the story, but her mom and dad really had raised her with love. In contrast to Kana-chan, she had grown up among a happy family; that much was undeniable.

Kana-chan continued, her voice trembling.

"Do you know how it feels? To realize that your father cheated and stop viewing it as a

bad thing to do as a result? To have your mom be fine with a rigged audition and, as her daughter, be fine with it too? Why don't you explain to me why I would do that?"
Kana-chan's question sent Akane's mind into a state of shock. For what reason wouldn't she defy her parents? She couldn't fathom any response apart from being scared of them.
"Well…" Akane tried to squeeze an answer out of her mind. "B-Because of brainwashing by them?"
"Cut out with that crap!" Kana screamed, shoving Akane away, making her fall onto her back.
Why is Kana-chan so angry? Among the pain and confusion, that was the one thing that preoccupied Akane's mind.
Kana-chan fiercely glared at Akane, who lay on the ground.
"Aren't you supposed to be smart? Then how come you can't get something so simple?"
"W-Well…" Akane audibly gulped down and continued. "There's nothing I can do. Profiling doesn't work all the time. If there's a mistake in the data that was gathered, then it can compromise the outline of the person that was—"
"That talk again! Who did you copy it from? Your beloved daddy?"
Kana-chan's tone became ice cold, sending shivers across Akane's spine.
"So you go around playing this game of profiling, calling someone else's parents toxic while pretending to care. I bet it's such a delightful game to play."
"Pretending to care? That wasn't my intention…"
Deep down, Akane just wanted to understand Kana-chan. She wanted to bond with her, learn more about how she felt. That was all she wanted.
However, in that desire, she seemed to profoundly offend Kana-chan.
"You have no character, do you? That's why you feel the need to impersonate others like it was so simple."
"What?"
"You don't have any thoughts of your own. You can't do anything alone. You get hurt so easily that you hide yourself in the shell of someone else like a coward. It's so obvious; all that talk about wanting to understand others is just a pretext to shield yourself because you don't want to get your own feelings hurt."

Kana-chan's searing declaration made Akane's mind go blank.

You have no character. That's why you try to learn about others, why you try to imitate them. Kana-chan had poked at something she herself had vaguely felt before. As she had said, Akane Kurokawa was a hopelessly frail person who was hurt easily. She could not deny that imitation was one of the methods she used to attempt to divert attention away from her weak self.

That's why she once began admiring the "Kana-chan," why she wished to be like that seemingly lovely girl who shined upon others with her radiating smile.

However, that same Kana-chan was now coldly staring at her as if she was worth less than garbage.

"No wonder, after all, you're not normal. Let me guess, you feel out of place in school; the way other people feel just doesn't register for you. As such, you burn time trying to get your head around how humans think."

You're just trying to pose as a human. Kana-chan spat it all out.

There were no words to describe the shock Akane felt. For her, it felt the same as hearing, "You're not human."

Even then… Her thoughts persisted. Many of those accusations hit close to home. The subtle workings of other people's hearts felt alien to her. That was just a part of her life. Getting into a misunderstanding caused because she couldn't catch small hints, rubbing others the wrong way as a result. These were all a routine she was used to by now. Hence why she tried to know better; she sought to avoid being hated.

I don't want to be left alone; it's scary. That feeling, lodged in her veins, controlled her heart. So, her thoughts rushed to the conclusion. *Kana feels the same as me. She's scared of being left alone by her mom.*

Kana-chan may be right. I might not be a human. Being unable to understand other people might mean I'm not normal.

As her mind approached that conclusion, a chilling sensation ran through her entire body.

I'm not normal.

That's why it's so hard for me to connect with Kana-chan or anyone else.

"You know what? I've always fought my battles with my own inner strength. I never had

to take from others, unlike you."
Kana-chan continued, "I finally realized."
"I simply hate you. I can't stand your acting style or the way you live your life. I don't feel like prying around other people's family matters with some kind of half-baked profiling."
Kana-chan's declarations were harsh to the point of sounding like death sentences for Akane's ears. *My only wish was to learn more about her; I never thought I would've hurt her so much. Up until now, I hadn't realized trying to barge into someone else's heart would affront them so much.*
Akane didn't even have the strength to lift her head. The only things she could see were the ever more abundant tears that soaked the wooden floor.

Kana Arima noticed Akane Kurokawa shaking and snorted in dismissal.
Yeah, parts of her analysis were accurate, shockingly accurate. But she dropped the ball by being naive like a child. Her entire premise was wrong. She can't understand me.
"I-I don't follow Mom because I'm scared of her; that's ridiculous."
All I want is to be hugged and hear, "You did great, Kana-chan." I just want to be loved by her, like any other child would.
That was all.
Kana was sure Akane could not understand her emotions. After all, how could she even explain that desire to be loved by her parents that persisted through all the abuse she endured throughout her life?
All the things that were beyond her grasp were served to Akane Kurokawa on a silver platter. How could that girl even hope to understand her frustration?
Kana's nose began to sting. She tried to hold back her tears, which seemed on the verge of bursting out. *Don't cry outside the stage. Don't let the mask come off.*
As she tried to contain her tears, Akane began to murmur.
"That's right, I'm not normal. Just like you said, Kana-chan, I can't understand other people's emotions, not even a little."

Akane, still on the ground, tightly clenching her fists. Her slender arms continued to tremble.

“But everything you said also applies to you, Kana-chan!”

“Uh?”

“Condescendingly looking down on others as if you knew them. And even going as far as treating them as aberrations. Who do you think you are?”

Akane’s soaked eyes scowled at Kana.

Kana suddenly was taken aback for a moment. She hadn’t seen anything like it from that girl before—a look of patent animosity.

“You also have no idea, Kana-chan. How much all you have said in the past has hurt me.”

“What in the past? Start speaking like an actual human.”

Akane breathed heavily, turning her face away and giving a curt response to Kana: “Whatever then!”

Kana audibly sighed in frustration.

“Alright, just like you said. I have a twisted personality. I don’t need anyone to tell me that.”

Akane sniffled for a moment before saying, “Oh, that’s right,” and proceeded.

“Clearly, there’s something twisted about you. I guess the idea of someone like me trying to understand you, Kana-chan, was a mistake from the very beginning.”

That tone of voice amidst her tears clearly indicated her repudiation of Kana.

This talk has nothing to do with the audition anymore. Kana thought. She and Akane Kurokawa were incompatible in every conceivable way, down to their essence. *A play co-starring both of us was doomed to fail from scratch.*

As Kana pondered over that idea, Akane suddenly blurted out.

“None of us are normal, neither me nor you, Kana-chan. That’s precisely why this play is perfect for us.”

After all, this script isn’t normal either. Akane continued to mutter with her unwavering expression.

“Uh?” Kana was iffy over what she heard.

That girl, even after being emotionally beaten down to the point of crying, was still

resolute about co-acting with the same person who had just done that to her. Every aspect of the situation left Kana startled. *What the hell is going on inside her mind?*

“Are you sure you still want to act alongside me?”

“Absolutely. Why?”

Akane wiped her tears using the sleeves of the costume she had worn for practice and then looked up towards Kana.

“You’re so annoying, Kana-chan. I don’t like you anymore, not one bit. But even then, none of that has anything to do with acting.”

“Anything to do?”

“You said it already. I’m a weak person; I hate getting hurt. That’s why I run away to my ‘imitations.’ For me, it has always been acting and nothing more.”

“Acting and nothing more… C’mon, stop trying to sound cool.”

“The exact same goes for you, Kana-chan.”

Akane fixed her gaze on Kana almost as if she was seeing through her mask. Even if her profiling was still unrefined, her intuition was not something to mess with.

“I don’t know what type of emotions you feel towards your mom, nor why you would continue to do as she says. I have no idea.”

“However,” Akane continued.

“If you entered this audition because that was what she wanted. Then that’s even more of a reason for you to play the peasant girl.”

“You’re still insisting on th—?”

“Listen!” Akane interrupted Kana.

“If we follow the plan I came up with. The peasant girl is guaranteed to shine the most on stage.”

“What do you mean?”

Akane began to explain her strategy to a puzzled Kana. Her ability to articulate her stance, despite being the same age as Kana, continued to amaze her.

Akane’s plan, in fact, was entirely centered on the notion of concentrating all the attention on the peasant girl. If everything went accordingly, Kana was basically guaranteed to pass the audition. She remained silent for some time, carefully pondering

it, before asking Akane.
“But, are you fine with that?”
“Of course, why wouldn’t I?”
“If we do this, it’ll take the spotlight away from the Goddess. That’d be nothing but detrimental to you.”
“So? I don’t care.” Akane answered with an indifferent expression. “I never had the desire to pass this audition in the first place.”
“What?” Kana reacted immediately, her face turning into a grimace.
“Then what are you even rehearsing for?”
“At first, it was because my theater company received an invitation. At least that’s how I felt back then. But now, merely standing on the stage already thrills me so much.”
Quite a different reason from yours, Kana-chan. Akane wryly smiled.
“But, don’t worry, I’m still going into the second phase with all I’ve got. I want to create something amazing; I can assure you.”
“Yeah, you’re quite the weirdo.”
“Eh?” Akane frowned at a sighing Kana.
“Weirdo? You’re treating me like an aberration again?”
“In some ways.” Kana shrugged her shoulders. “You don’t seem to be too concerned with getting praise. That’s a talent in a way.”
“What? But I don’t have—”
“If you say you don't have any talent, you deserve a beating from all actors across the world.”
Kana snorted with laughter.
“You do have a talent. The talent to discern the essence of someone else and replicate it. It still has a lot of polishing and maturing to do, but once you learn how to properly use it, it’ll become a powerful tool in your arsenal.”
It's not for me to say, “If only I could’ve been born with such talent.” I’ve long realized I’m not a gifted actress. It’s useless to think about what could’ve been otherwise. I’ve got to play with the cards I was dealt in life if I want any chance to win.
At that moment, a slightly bewildered Akane stared at her.
“What now?” Kana questioned. “It’s just…” Akane wavered, scratching her cheeks as a

clear sign of embarrassment.
“You caught me by surprise. You were the first person to say that to me.”
From the looks of it, Akane had never realized the level of talent she possessed. *Talk about a case of hiding a light under a bushel.*
“Hmm…” Kana pinned her attention on Akane. “Weirdo, no doubt.”
“Unh!” Akane pouted.
“If you’re going to insist on that, then you’re one big weirdo. I could’ve never guessed you’d turn out to be one massive mama's girl.”
“Mama’s girl? You've got some nerve.”
At an unexpected turn of the conversation, Kana glared at Akane.
“Yep, I hate you. I gotta admit you have talent, but more importantly, I hate your guts.”
“Thank you, Kana-chan. I couldn’t hope to receive a greater compliment.”
Akane displayed a sizable smirk.
“I, too, had to deal with some disappointments. You’re nothing like that girl I saw on TV in the past.”
“Oh yeah?” Kana side-eyed Akane. “Does that mean you used to watch my programs?”
“Just a bit. But I wasn’t a fan or anything. I’ve never admired you, Kana-chan, not even once in my life.”
Akane started to talk faster as she turned her head away.
“But even then. In a way, I’m a bit happy I met the real Kana-chan. Maybe some day, you might meet other people who also come to appreciate all of you, even this nasty side.”
“Again, you’ve got some nerve. Are you trying to make fun of me?”
“Of course?”
Akane laughed, sticking her tongue out. *This girl is a good person in the end. My first impressions of her were all wrong.*
She might be perfect to play an evil Goddess. That was what Kana believed on that day.

All of Taiki Himekawa’s attention had been gripped by the presentation the two girls

displayed.

Within the Goddess whom Akane Kurokawa portrayed lay the desire to own the peasant girl interpreted by Kana Arima. With their performance centered around that interpretation of the script, Taiki could not help but anxiously anticipate what the finale would bring.

At that instant, their play entered its third and final act. As the hellish night had passed, the lonely survivor, the peasant girl, returned to the Goddess' side.

“My Goddess! Are you okay?”

Kana Arima frantically rushed from the corners of the stage, covered in make-up that gave her the appearance of being stained in soot from top to bottom.

She quickly reached the Goddess and kneeled; nothing else was even worthy of her attention. She took a piece of cloth out of her apron and desperately began polishing the Goddess’ body, “Dear heavens, look how dirty you got.”

I get it now, Taiki whispered.

Her demeanor gave a sense of desperation much stronger than that of Riko Suzumi’s previous performance for the character. It was almost like the village destruction hadn’t even had much of an effect on her; all that mattered was the Goddess.

“Hmm…” Nijino, beside him, focused his attention on the stage, equally entranced.

“It strikes a whole new chord when compared to the previous pair. That peasant girl comes off as a thrall.”

“It’s fascinating in a way.” Taiki folded his arms. “Kana Arima’s body language isn’t that far off from what Riko Suzumi was doing. And yet, it produces such a distinctive mood.”

“It’s the result of how they devised the interactions between the two characters during act two. From that point they were already rendering the relationship between the Goddess and the peasant girl as one of a sovereign and her thrall. The very delicate shifts in tone of voice and gestures all culminated here.”

“Those two really thought about it all.”

Interesting, Taiki thought. *They took their due time when conceptualizing their portrayal of the characters.*

A ravished look crossed the Goddess Akane portrayed as she looked down towards the peasant girl.

“Thank you. You truly possess a kind heart. I’m glad that at least you, of all people, survived.”
“What…” The girl lifted her head.
“Only I survived?”
“Correct. All other villagers were consumed by the flames.”
The Goddess declared, almost like she was saying they had paid for their actions.
“What a pitiful girl. Yet, you may not have a single worry from now on. From this moment onwards, I will be your eternal protector.”
The atmosphere suddenly contorted into a darkness akin to a black hole at the exact moment that facade of doting affection shattered. The Goddess, in her elegance, gently touched the peasant girl’s cheek with her fingertips.
“Calm down your heart. You mustn’t feel lonely ever again.”
Her tantalizing tone shocked Taiki down to his core. The smile Akane Kurokawa flaunted was an insidiously wicked grin, the antipode to Emily Takafuji’s Goddess.
That wasn’t the same girl he encountered at the practice room of *Hydrangea*, at least it didn’t seem to be. The girl who before emanated such a docile presence now commanded the stage with her fiendish aura. *What a transformation! Calling her a possessed type was spot on.*
Akane Kurokawa’s ominous presence gripped not only Taiki but also enthralled the entire hall. It was the first time they had witnessed an actress capable of that level of performance.
“Amazing.” Nijino murmured, resting his back on the seat. His eyes were wide open as he gazed upon the Goddess.
“And to think there would be a girl that capable while being only twelve. She possesses an unparalleled capacity to discern the script and express it. Her keen sense is nothing short of a genius.”
And it looks like Himekawa-kun is on the same page as me. Nijino faintly chuckled after taking a glance at Taiki, who frowned back at him with an expression that said, “Could you stop it?” However, it was undeniable that he had been dazzled by Akane Kurokawa; in fact, that girl possessed a mystical aptitude to bewitch the entire audience.
“After watching the first phase, I had rushed to the conclusion that only Arima could

stand out like that, but Kurokawa is now proving she can do the same."
"If anything, it gives the impression that she's absorbing Arima-san's style."
"I see." Taiki nodded, agreeing with Nijino's comment.
Akane Kurokawa's talent was her unparalleled ability to discern and replicate. It made sense she would also study a fellow actress sharing the stage with her.
The more that girl performed on stage, the more she would evolve. *We might be witnessing a generational talent right before our eyes.* Taiki thought.
"Well, I can totally picture her making a name for herself soon."
"I agree, right now, Akane Kurokawa is the closest to getting the role."
"And what about Arima?"
"Her performance isn't bad, but, in essence, it doesn't go beyond taking a submissive stance in relation to Kurokawa-san. She helps to accentuate the feeling of dominance that the Goddess exudes, but not much else. For better or for worse, it still feels a bit too bound to the script."
"And from the looks of it, you want something that transcends that."
"Yes, that girl has a very distinct skill, and I'd love to see her using it."
Nijino made it pretty clear he was eagerly anticipating something special from Kana Arima. Like he had indicated before, he was putting all his stocks in her. Taiki shared the sentiment. He could feel Kana Arima had something in store. And he had the hunch she was close to pulling out such a trump card.
Alright, what do you have for us, "Genius Child Actress"? Taiki folded his arms, attentively watching the play.

Now, Akane Kurokawa, to the marrow of her bones, was the Goddess.
She's not on a stage inside a theater hall; she's in the ashes of what once was the outskirts of a small village. She can even feel the scent of soot in her nose.
As a Goddess, Akane awakened, at the core of her being, something analogous to affection towards Kana-chan, the peasant girl in front of her. To love and be loved, to shape her as she wanted—that's her desire.

She could not tell anymore what part of those feelings were the Goddess' or hers; the line had become blurry due to how engrossed she had become in her imitation.

"Oh, virtuous young girl, today I offer you an everlasting love."

Akane strongly expressed the yearning for control the Goddess inside of her felt. The third act had finally reached its climax.

From all that Akane Kurokawa knew, Kana Arima was by no means an actress who just happened to stumble into success after being blessed with a hit role. She was capable of unleashing a powerful flood of emotions, a whirlpool of fierce passion. She would channel that ability through her acting and use it in her performances.

Make yourself the atmosphere. Devour everything around you. Make the performers around you fade into the background. Burn bright, turning everything else into ashes.

Every time she would perform with that mentality, her presence became akin to the sun.

An acolyte like me knows that fact very well.

A face that says, "Look at me." An acting that proclaims, "Look only at me."

I want to see Kana-chan using that acting.

Now, it's your time to shine, Kana-chan. Akane winked at the peasant girl in front of her.

That was the point where the peasant girl would reject the Goddess, where she would realize her true intention and grieve over the desolate situation she had been trapped in.

That was the plan that Akane and Kana-chan had carefully devised. Kana-chan would use her trump card, her crying act, and those tears would testify that the peasant girl had broken free from the control of the Goddess.

Through that, it would tell the audience this story was about the growth of the peasant girl. That was Akane's goal. She had always intended to give the peasant girl the spotlight.

As an acolyte, she prepared the groundwork for a stage where Kana could extract all of her ability.

"M-My Goddess…"

Silence came. The peasant girl's lips were sealed, and a stillness commanded the stage.

From that point on, the stage would be under her command. The one scene Akane burned with anticipation to see.

The peasant girl raised her head and looked at Akane.
Akane gulped. That expression showed a mixture of both loathing and dread towards the Goddess. It was not Kana-chan's signature crying face.
Kana Arima let out a frightened smile.
"Yes. From now on, I may serve you forever, never leaving your side."
Akane was stunned. There wasn't a trace of rejection towards the Goddess in that expression. If anything, it seemed to convey a state of total submission.
Kana-chan was making the face of someone who had accepted being controlled, the face of a wretched young girl.
That would ruin the plan. If the peasant girl were to end as a complete pawn of the evil Goddess, then there would be no growth to her character and, of course, no spotlight for her. All the attention would end up on the Goddess.
Why, Kana-chan? Why?
Just why, why?
Why don't you do what I want?
At that moment, she felt a passionate look coming from the audience.
Nijino Shuugo opened his eyes so wide it almost felt like she could hear it from the stage.
Suddenly, it felt as if all pieces of her acting had fallen into place.
What face am I making right now? A grin of joy from a Goddess who succeeds in controlling the young girl? What type of character am I even portraying anymore?
Kana Arima for a very brief moment, let out a smile that only Akane could see, almost as if she signaled, "What a nice face you got there."
Akane saw her reflection on one of the accessories attached to the peasant girl's costume. *What is this face? Is that how I am looking at her?*
That was a face of disappointment.
Anticipation, anger, and self-loathing were all present in that face. It was filled with both the arrogance of wanting to control the girl and the frustration of having her expectations shattered.
It wasn't the face someone would show towards a 12-year-old girl, and yet, that was the face Akane was directing at her.

Can human emotions really look this merciless? Can a single look really carry so much meaning?

Akane Kurokawa suddenly felt deeply shocked upon realizing how her acting seemed to enter a new realm.

That was Kana Arima's world. She had pulled Akane into her realm by force.

I can feel the audience's attention fixating on this whirlpool of emotions in my face. I can even feel the heavy weight of their anticipation.

The more Akane tried to elevate her acting to meet that anticipation, the more Kana Arima blended into the atmosphere.

What Kana Arima played was an *Atmosphere* in the truest essence of the concept, something that was not seen, whose own presence was not even acknowledged.

All it did was accentuate the new talent who appeared.

The audience was left in a state of potent yet silent enthusiasm as the curtains closed. Nijino had a visible, content smile, and even staff members couldn't talk about anything else but Akane Kurokawa. Yet, among all that enthusiasm, Taiki Himekawa felt a lonely feeling of boredom, murmuring, "What was that?"

The pitiful peasant girl displayed a captive smile towards the evil Goddess. In her state of profound guilt and dread, she didn't even try to resist being shackled.

It left a terrible taste. It was a full divergence from the way Takafuji and Suzumi had ended their presentation.

"What do you think?"

Questioned by Nijino, Taiki shared his honest impression, "It felt a bit eerie."

"Akane Kurokawa's evil Goddess especially took the spotlight from the middle onwards. This whole play centered around her was outstanding, a top-tier performance, I might say."

"You describe it as outstanding, and yet it's clear from your face that you aren't satisfied."

Nijino made a precise observation. Taiki scratched the back of his head. “Well, it’s just…”

“The peasant girl—it just felt like the character of the peasant girl had been cut short of its potential.”

Kana Arima’s trump card, which Taiki was so eager to view, hadn’t been used at all. He was immensely let down; there was no other way to describe it.

“Hum…” Nijino took a moment to think.

“Kana Arima-san did suddenly lose momentum at the end. Maybe it’s because she was devoured by Akane Kurokawa-san?”

“So you also had that impression? Because that’s the only explanation I can picture at the moment.”

During the first phase, Kana Arima had total command over the stage. Despite sharing it with seasoned actors, she was still able to assert her influence and perfectly render her “child who is treated like atmosphere” role.

However, the powerful charisma from the first phase was gone. Instead, she seemed, somehow, to be eclipsed by Akane Kurokawa’s Goddess.

If it was the Kana Arima he knew, she should have been able to devour Akane Kurokawa with her acting. An audition was the one place where an actor would do anything to not get overshadowed. Intentionally holding back in that environment would be foolish. Kana, at least, would probably be aware of that fact.

And yet… Taiki pondered.

“What if that acting was a calculated move?”

“Calculated?” Nijino slightly tilted his head. “Are you suggesting that Arima-san holding herself at the last moment was deliberate?”

“I can’t explain it; I’m not fully sure myself. But I was thinking, “What if she was still playing a type of ‘atmosphere’?”

Inside Taiki’s mind, an idea began to surge. *It almost feels like Kana Arima went out of her way to make herself a stepping stone for Akane Kurokawa.*

“That’s noteworthy, if true.”

But why restrain herself like that? Trying to help a dear friend? I can’t come up with a reason. And yet, the notion that Kana Arima had purposely taken a step back in favor of

Akane Kurokawa was the only one he could fathom.

There were some seasoned actors capable of deliberately lowering their acting presence to make their partners on the stage stand out more. By their actions, they made themselves a spotlight that illuminated their fellows with a vibrant light.

It goes without saying that it wasn't a skill that anyone had. Taking a *submissive stance* in a way that made their co-actors stand out demanded a great capacity to adapt to each situation and create a sort of chemistry on stage. It was something unreachable to your typical child actor.

And yet, Kana Arima seemingly had just pulled that off for the second phase. That, in a certain way, was more impressive than merely standing out on stage. After all, it showed that despite her age, she possessed a particular skill at the level of an experienced actor to make others *shine*.

It might be worthwhile to take a more profound look at her acting abilities later. That was Taiki's conclusion, to which Nijino disagreed.

"Even if we were to assume that was her goal, you should never lower your head in battle. What I wanted to find was one thing: a girl with hunger."

"A girl with hunger?"

"Arima-san bowed her head to the ground just so that she could get a chance to enter this audition. What I felt in her at that moment was fierce hunger and ambition."

Nijino shook his head, feeling let down.

"I don't have any use for a girl who hides herself on stage in any of my plays."

Hearing Nijino's decision, Taiki could only shrug his shoulders. "Is that so?"

He didn't see Nijino's view as particularly cruel. At the end of the day, the world of acting was a fierce jungle where those who could use their appeal the best thrived and those who couldn't were eaten.

"So, I guess this audition's winner is Akane Kurokawa."

"Yes, that's my decision." Nijino nodded, content.

"I mean, have you seen her performance? That expression seemed to portray all facets of the karma a human ought to carry, at once."

Nijino was referring to the very end of her performance. The face the Goddess had made after the young girl's sincere vow.

The sight of that expression was bone-chilling for Taiki.
Her cruelty finally reached its boiling point; even the audience could feel the pure hopelessness of the peasant creeping into their minds.
If he were to compare scenarios, the submission of the peasant girl seemed disappointing for the Goddess. He wondered whether that profound sadness and total unquestioning submission was what she truly desired. That scene depicted the moment her heart lost interest, when she thought, “How boring.” Where it was made clear how she played with humans like toys. It would certainly justify titling this play *The Wicked Goddess.*
It's difficult to properly put this information into words, but it’s miraculous, in a way. Taiki came to an understanding as an actor.
There was already an eerie feeling to the Goddess expression, but it transcended the divine. That performance, which had been portraying a side that could not feel empathy, suddenly, for a moment, showed the audience a human-like wickedness.
Our attention was being maneuvered, all through Kana Arima.
Nijino continued with his excitement, which wouldn’t slow down.
“Akane Kurokawa is still a diamond in the rough, but her lingering potential is abundant. No wonder you, Himekawa-kun, recommended her to the *Lala Lai Theater Company.*”
“Well, that’s true.”
Everything had already been agreed upon with *Hydrangea*. They were delighted with the proposal: “As long as Akane-chan is fine with it, you have my blessing.” This proposal was the reason Taiki had shown up at the practice room that day.
If it were up to Taiki to decide, he would have invited Kana Arima alongside Akane. However, even inside *Lala Lai*, there was a significant number of people who could not stand “The Kana Arima.”
Therefore, against his best wishes, he was able to solely recommend Akane Kurokawa to the troupe.
A bad name can really make things harder for you everywhere. What a huge waste of precious talent. Taiki thought.
“However, it’s quite odd, don’t you think?” Nijino deeply murmured.
“Who would have thought that the obscure Akane Kurokawa sharing the stage with the

former genius child actress Kana Arima would end up like that?”
“Yeah, it came out of left field.”
Taiki nodded while shifting his attention to the stage from which Akane Kurokawa and Kana Arima were leaving.
Even looking at them from afar, it was clear by the looks on their faces that their feelings at the moment were complicated.
“One thing that was clear was the difference in experience. Akane Kurokawa may be a genius, but she’s still unpolished. Putting it bluntly, she still doesn’t have the prowess to match Kana Arima if she went all out. And yet, that happened.”
A glance at Akane Kurokawa showed her looking down with a gloomy expression.
Maybe she was still processing the performance she had just made.
But from her demeanor, she seemed to have already realized that her Goddess had shone so much as a result of the illumination Kana Arima had provided.
She adjusted to your level of prowess.
You were illuminated by her.
Taiki whispered while looking at Akane Kurokawa.
Meanwhile, Kana Arima continued to move towards the audience seats from directly behind her. Taiki suddenly felt some sympathy towards her sullen look.
If she acted alongside someone better than her, maybe she could have gone all out. Maybe the result could have been different.
If her partner was at the level she didn’t need to have any reservations towards, Arima probably would have faced the play with all she had. Sadly, Akane Kurokawa still hasn’t reached that level.
A play where you can’t act for real is plain boring. I’d like to try acting seriously with her in a full-on clash out, maybe someday in some other play.
Try not to vanish until then, genius child actress.

Kana exited the hall by the door behind the audience seats as the staff members instructed. She followed Akane Kurokawa, crossing the corridor in complete silence.

Reaching the lobby outside the hall, she saw two familiar faces, Emily Takafuji and Riko Suzumi. They were still wearing their costumes and had their heads lowered at the corner of the lobby while looking pale.
A woman in her 50s wearing traditional Japanese clothes stood right in front of them. Her slim figure and massive eyes, almost lizard-like, stood out in the lobby.
“You two have disappointed me.”
The woman in traditional clothing scowled at Emily and Riko with stern eyes.
“From all I could see in the audience, there was one pair that offered a truly staggering performance. The performance of that girl named Akane Kurokawa was especially astounding. In comparison, your performance was nothing short of mediocre. You have embarrassed the name of *Moon’s Dream*.”
Oh, I see. Kana thought. That woman was Emily and Riko’s supervisor from *Moon’s Dream*. For her to be able to see the audition must have meant that she had connections with Nijino.
Emily and Riko were frightened.
Kana remembered very well how it felt to be so harshly reprimanded by an adult like that.
Those girls were probably under an enormous amount of daily stress too. Maybe their bad attitude towards their competitors derived from how cornered they felt.
Even then, she had no intention of extending words of consolation to them. They had entered this world of survival of the fittest out of their own desire. Therefore, they would need to make up for their failures on their own.
Well, I also have my own failures to make up for. Kana sighed.

Passing by the kimono lady who reprimanded Emily-san and Riko-san, there was an elevator hall.
That place, wholly silent and with no sight of any other person, was the ideal place to carefully talk.

Akane suddenly looked back and asked,

“Why?”

Kana-chan showed no particular shift in her expression and said, “What?” Still in her peasant girl costume, a few drops of sweat were present on her forehead.

Akane took one step closer to her.

“Why did you not cry at the end?”

She was supposed to have cried at that last scene. They had repeatedly trained together over the last three weeks with that plan in mind.

However, Kana-chan, showing no trace of guilt, replied:

“To improve the performance.”

A great performance—that was undoubtedly what Akane wished for. But she couldn’t think of Kana-chan’s crying as a bad one.

“That’s no good.” Akane glared at Kana-chan.

“Hadn’t we agreed that you would be the lead? Then why did you decide to illuminate me?”

“Because you were making a good performance. So I just thought that if I illuminated you, I could make you shine brighter.”

What are you talking about? Akane couldn’t believe her ears. Was Kana-chan saying that she had made that performance for her?

Kana-chan should have stood out above anyone else in this play. There was absolutely no reason for her to elevate Akane.

“No, this isn’t the way. Kana-chan, you should have been more selfi—”

Before Akane could finish, Kana-chan shook her head. “No, this is how it’s done.”

“This was necessary to win against those two.”

Kana-chan tightly bit her lower lip; her face was one confused mix of emotions.

Does she—does Kana-chan really believe that we’d have lost if the spotlight had been on her?

“Don’t you have any faith in your own talent?”

“I don’t have any talent. I’m not a genius. That’s just how I do things.”

“No, that performance is not right. Kana-chan, your performances are more self-centered… and staggering, almost like the sun.”

The type of performance where you dazzlingly shine brighter than anyone else—that was what I liked so much, and yet… Akane screamed in her heart. *Even though I entered the world of theater because I idolized that type of acting.*

"Kana-chan, the you who makes a performance like that… I-I hate it."

Akane glared at Kana-chan, who, with an unruffled face, replied, "I see."

"I also hate your type of acting. Then the feeling is mutual."

Kana-chan said just those words and went towards the waiting room alone.

Akane no longer had any strength to pursue after her. Inside her heart, she felt as if something she had carefully cherished for so long had loudly crumbled.

As a result, when Nijino-san proclaimed her the winner later on, in heart of hearts, Akane could not rejoice at the occasion.

That night, Kana was smacked in the cheek by her mom.

"What? What do you mean you didn't pass?"

The cheek hit by Mom began to sting more and more. In contrast, Kana's heart was numb to it. That pain was expected. She could very well see that would be the result of explaining what happened during the day to her.

"Haven't I told you to take the more prominent role of the Goddess? And now you're telling me you just handed it over to that other girl, and she passed?"

Kana obediently said, "I'm sorry" and bowed.

Of course, she glossed over the fact that she had intentionally performed in a way that made Akane Kurokawa stand out more. Saying that would just add unnecessary fuel to the fire.

No matter how much Mom cries, no matter how much she asks for a reason, that was my choice and no one else's.

Kana clung to her philosophy to the very end.

What Kana Arima believed in was harmony. The satisfaction of the whole. She wished to serve the work in its entirety. If the work could be improved by one thread, then she would diligently be that thread. Even if that were to be to her detriment.

If it would hurt her, it would be for someone else's benefit. The person who had instilled that way of living in Kana was right in front of her.

“Oh, I see it now. Everyone is against me! Everyone else will just throw my efforts in the garbage.”

“No, that’s not the case, Mom!”

Kana affectionately hugged her mom.

Kana had realized that no one else but her could take care of her mother, a wretched woman who had a distorted perception of the world and always resorted to blaming everyone else to protect herself.

While hugging her nauseated mother, she looked towards the ceiling; that act of comfort had become a habit so ingrained that there was no heart in it anymore.

For a moment, she began to reflect on Akane Kurokawa. *That girl is the one who’s actually worthy of being called a genius.* In the almost a month she had spent rehearsing alongside her, she became certain of that.

Her personality was by no means that of a normal person, and precisely for that reason, she could use it for her acting. As Akane had said, for her, it had always been acting and nothing more. Someone who lived solely for the stage.

And above all, she relished acting. That was an emotion Kana Arima no longer carried. She envied that girl with all her heart.

She may hate Akane, but looking at her as an actress, she carried an extraordinary light capable of burning so bright. It would be a waste to not push her to the forefront. At the moment of the audition, that thought had invaded Kana’s mind.

In the end, she couldn’t help but cherish acting. Trying to convince herself that “acting doesn’t matter” had been a futile endeavor.

In short, Kana had illuminated Akane as a result of following what she believed.

Therefore, even after Mom had yelled and smacked her, she didn’t shed any tears.

“Enough, how much more do you have to ruin my life to be satisfied?”

Mom forcibly pulled Kana, who was hugging her, away and let out a heavy sigh.

Following that, she violently opened the sliding door.

“Bam,” the oppressive sound reverberated. Had it been the Kana from a little while ago, that sound would have been enough to make her cry.

“I shouldn’t have had you.”

Mom had just said words capable of gouging through the heart. The atmosphere of the room became slightly colder.

But it was all fine now. No matter what other violent words she could throw, they wouldn’t hurt Kana’s heart.

Through that play, Kana had come to understand one thing.

That in the end, Mom, and even Kana herself, were the same as that Goddess.

Wretched people who put their expectations on others, felt disappointed when things didn’t go their way and burned with self-loathing.

It was I who was too attached. I’ll stop holding on to this hope of being loved.

That way of thinking brought some relief to her. She started to consider treasuring herself a bit more. Thereafter, all she needed to do was endure; time would take care of the rest.

I’m still a child with a future, after all.

Kana lifted the corners of her mouth, letting out a grin.

“I’m sorry, Mom; I promise to work harder next time.”

And so, Kana wore the mask of the peasant girl, the good daughter. She had decided to keep offering her pity to Mom as long as she could.

Until the day came when the forlorn Goddess, Mom, would grow tired of her.

Epilogue

“And this year’s winner of the Best Lead Actress award is… Akane Kurokawa and Kana Arima! Congratulations to both of you for this outstanding achievement.”
The cameras all flashed at once when the female host announced those words.
Kana Arima instinctively fabricated a smile; if there was anything she had learned by having cameras pointed at her for almost 20 years, it was how to forge a convincing one.
The press conference was held inside the event room of a hotel located in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area. Shining chandeliers in the ceiling, walls decorated in damask, a luxurious red carpet below, and a logo written “Japan’s Theater Awards” behind their seats—that was the environment where Akane and Kana found themselves.
Recently, the play starring both of them, *Thorn Sisters,* became a hit.
From opening to closing night, all presentations had sold out. The success was so immense that it had already been greenlit for a new run to start the following month.
Consequently, Kana and Akane received the prestigious honor of being awarded the best leading actresses in this year’s edition of the event.
The host began to address the reporters in the hall.
“Akane Kurokawa-san and Kana Arima-san are both actresses who had exceptional careers going back to their childhood. There’s no shortage of movies and plays co-starring them. I’m delighted at the opportunity to interview both of them today and ask about their impressions of each other.”
“Kana Arima-san,” the host shifted her attention to Kana.
“Your first time acting alongside each other was in an audition promoted by Nijino Shuugo, the same director responsible for *Thorn Sisters,* is that correct?”
“Yes, it’s correct,” Kana nodded.
Kana and Akane first got in contact with Nijino Shuugo when they were around 12 years old. Now, there were a total of three of his plays in which they were both part of the cast, or four if the second phase of that audition were to be counted.

“Arima-san, what was your impression of Kurokawa-san back then?”
“Let me see…” Kana took a moment to ponder the host’s question. *Well, might as well give a straight answer here.*
“That she was a very weird girl. Someone more than willing to stalk another person to prepare for a role. That just about sums it up. Honestly, her presence would creep me out sometimes.”
“Wait a moment, Kana-chan, do you really have to make it sound so bad?”
Akane, sitting beside her, protested in a high and jumbled voice.
A small laugh circulated among the reporters, who thought Kana was merely joking. None of them knew about Akane’s habit of rather over-the-top analyses.
The host directed her gaze to Akane, asking, “And you, Kurokawa-san, what did you think of Arima-san?”
Akane glanced at Kana.
“That she was not only a bitter person but also had an unbelievably nasty personality. I lost count of how many times she made me cry back then. If anything, instead of ‘The Genius Child Actress Who Can Cry in Ten Seconds Flat,’ her nickname should have been ‘The Genius Child Who Makes Others Cry in Ten Seconds Flat,’ it fits her better.”
The hall laughed even louder with Akane’s declaration.
“You’re again pushing things too far…”
Unflinching under Kana’s venomous glare, Akane continued.
“In the past, I’ve found Kana-chan to be someone challenging to comprehend. But now, I consider analyzing her to be completely impossible.”
“Completely impossible?”
“She’s one actress I could never imitate. Try to take a look deep inside her, and you’ll find something different every time. She had a wide array of skills; even I am not sure how I should define her—free-spirited or maybe versatile. At least that's how I see it.”
“In the end, no one is as much of a nuisance to me as Kana-chan.” Akane continued.
Is that supposed to be… praise? Kana swallowed the retort, “The real nuisance here is you.”
“So, understanding her was my life’s goal at that time. But considering her twisted personality and how weird she was, that was quite a challenge.”

“And my goal was to get the hell away from this girl. Her eyes scared me.”
Kana’s counter resulted in the hall once again exploding with laughter. For them, it was just casual and playful banter.
“You two have such wonderful chemistry,” the clueless host delightfully proceeded. “Every so often I hear a rumor that you two secretly hate each other, but from this perspective, I can clearly see you’ve been close since childhood.”
“What?” Akane tilted her head. “But I do hate her.”
Kana didn’t waste a second and replied while grinning, “And I hate you 100 times more.”
“Here you go again,” the host wryly smiled.
“Well, the two women in your latest play butted heads like this, so I guess it’s part of developing the role.”
Akane took the cue from the host and nodded, “Yeah, we’re just joking.”
“We even rehearse together every once in a while, isn’t that right, Kana-chan?”
Kana answered by pulling her eyelid down and sticking out her tongue, sending the hall into laughter.
Was their relationship a good or a bad one? Probably not even the two girls had a proper answer to that.
Rather, their view was that it was for the better. Their relationship didn’t exactly fit simple everyday terms like “friend” or “rival.”
If anything, we’re like an etude. Kana thought.
It’s like a deep friendship where we can’t get rid of each other even if we try. Sometimes we’re just two actresses dedicating ourselves to the same play. Other times, we’re rivals in love, falling for the same guy. And in tough times, she can be a close friend with whom I could share my grief like I couldn’t with anyone else.
It’s an ever-changing relationship. Over the years, we’ve taken on so many diverse roles.
I’m sure this etude will continue for a while.
“Well, how do I put it…” Kana took the microphone. “I can’t deny I’m here today because of this girl. I’ve made up my mind to never lose to her.”
“That’s right.” Akane nodded. “I can also thank her for being in theater to this day. She was the first one to point out my talent to me.”

Kana glanced in Akane's direction.
"Next time, I'm taking this prize for myself."
"That's my line."
Akane clapped back with a smile covered in the same unrelenting determination.
At that moment, a relentless barrage of flashes started once again, likely seeking a shot capturing the moment their faces stared at each other. "The Resolution of Two Rivals and Beyond," the news articles would probably publish some crap like that again, they thought.
"Then, Kurokawa-san," the host said to Akane.
"Would you like to dedicate this award to someone?"
"Now that you mention it. I'd like to dedicate it to my family, my colleagues in *Lala Lai*, and all the people who looked after me when I was just a child in a juvenile troupe."
"I'm sure all of them are very pleased." The host chuckled and then shifted her attention to Kana. "What about you, Arima-san?"
"I'd like to dedicate it to my colleagues from my idol days. Those girls were always there for me in rough times."
"Plus…" Kana looked straight into the camera at the front row and declared.
"I'd like to express my gratitude to my mom, who has always supported me ever since I was a child."
"I see. I'm convinced she must be delighted right now."
For the host, that wasn't anything but a lighthearted comment, which she directed at Kana while displaying a broad smile.
However, deep down, Kana wasn't so sure. If her mom were to even hear about the awards, she doubted it would move her in any way.
A few years after the audition, when Kana was pondering whether to enroll in high school or not, Mom had already lost all interest in her.
Right as all of Kana's jobs related to her child actress days vanished, Mom came to her and said, "Your grandfather has suffered a hip injury, so I'll be moving to his home to take care of him."
For someone who loved to interfere in all aspects of Kana's life, she was quick to get out of it. Leaving Kana to live all alone in that apartment while promptly hiding herself in

the countryside.

The result: Kana was now all alone in the show business world.

She affiliated with the agency *Strawberry Productions* and devoted herself to being an idol as part of the group *B-Komachi* while at the same time exhaustively striving for new work opportunities as an actress. The fruits of her labor eventually came, and now she stands on this gala occasion.

Kana could potentially try contacting her mom by phone, but she didn't imagine getting anything except a muted reaction. No matter which plays she starred in or which awards she earned, the response would always be a mild "I see, you worked hard."

Ever since Kana became too old to be called a "child actress" and Mom stopped meddling in her business, their relationship became something akin to complete strangers.

There was so much Kana wanted to tell Mom, how selfish and coldhearted she had been, or how she wished to have been loved more.

But none of that really mattered anymore.

Enough, Mom already managed to throw away any attachment she had for the "Genius Child Actress, Kana Arima." That's how it is; it's better for the both of us to stay like this. Kana slowly came to realize. *Mom and I are different people; we need to eventually become independent from each other.*

Mom is already a wretched person; no good will come of trying to corner her. I'll just make peace with the fact she's weak-hearted; consider this to be family kindness.

In the end, Mom was someone who had been blinded by all the glamour the industry seemed to offer. She saw Kana, on whom she placed her dreams, as an extension of herself. And she let go of that self.

Maybe she felt suffocated trying to hold together her hopes and aspirations while it all went out of her control.

Reflecting on that didn't stir any anger in Kana, just pity.

Not to mention… Kana thought. *I no longer act for her sake. If I live and breathe now, it's all for a much more precious feeling I carry in my chest.*

The person Kana wished to share her joy with was one who could no longer be reached by direct words.

The press conference ended, the night passed, and now Akane Kurokawa was taking a little walk around town.

Today was an off day, something she hadn't experienced in a long time. The weather was clear, and a pleasant winter breeze cooled her skin while outside. The perfect type of day to just let her hair down and relax.

Should she go to a movie theater and watch one of the recent blockbusters or take some time to read while in one of her favorite cafes? Akane pondered over the various ways of spending her leisure time, only to take some time for reading and unexpectedly dozing off. Once she woke up, it was already evening outside.

Living alone was gradually turning her into a loafer, at least in her eyes. Before, she could never idle away the day like that, but Mom wasn't there to scold her for it anymore. Although it was natural that among her busy and sleep-deprived schedule, some of her empty days would turn out in such a manner. She got up, put on her coat, and headed towards a specific destination, easily reachable by walking.

Taking two separate elevators down from her apartment building, she passed through the lobby and took a trivial walk of about ten minutes, reaching what was a rather mundane pedestrian bridge.

She stopped at the middle of the bridge and took two steps to the left. There, she positioned both her arms on the fence and rested her face on top of them.

The dusk sky illuminated the bridge, the same place where she once spoke with a certain someone.

"Today I chatted with Ruby-chan inside a TV station," "The director failed once again to get a date," "Kana-chan has been the same as always…"

By talking like that, I can receive his responses, at least from the him inside of me. Of course, I'm just talking to myself, sorting out my thoughts. It's a small ritual I developed; it helps me feel almost like his soul was still in this world.

A crow on top of the nearby pole cawed. Akane turned her head and noticed a girl

whose long hair swayed in the breeze.

“The same as always, huh?”

It was Tsukuyomi-chan, a child actress who was in the cast of *The 15-Year Lie.*

She had grown a lot since then and turned into an awe-inspiring beauty. Her attire wasn't anything like the uniforms of nearby schools; instead, her all-black sailor uniform would better fit a funeral.

Tsukuyomi-chan began staring at me while displaying a faint smile.

“What I do on my day off is not your business.”

“But, it seems unhealthy. It's almost like you can’t fully accept his death.”

She loves making that condescending laugh. We just keep bumping into each other despite never scheduling anything. It's almost like she has had her eyes on me for quite a while.

I had done research on her before. She had mysteriously deep connections with the Hoshino family, so I tried to just do a background check, only to poke into a hornet’s nest.

“You shouldn’t think of bringing back the dead. That’s heresy.”

“Even if it's heresy, there's a way, right?”

She was part of the world of the occult.

Being born to a family of traditional and high-standing Shinto priests, she was a girl without a name, belonging to a world wholly foreign to me.

One that, for example, possessed techniques capable of instilling the memories of the dead into newborns.

If such techniques exist, then it might be possible to replicate them.

Maybe I could meet him one more time.

Tsukuyomi-chan sighed, almost like she had seen through my intentions.

“I’m not so sure. You might be stepping onto a road that leads into hell.”

She left those words and went towards the black-painted Century parked near the bridge. The driver seemed to scowl at me.

I was ready to go into hell with him if necessary.

My fight is not over—not yet. I need to research everything I can until all of this makes sense. Only then, I feel, will I finally be able to come to terms with my broken and

grieving heart.

Kana Arima, today, was once again in front of that gravestone, her face decorated by an imposing grimace reminiscent of a god of wrath.
The blue gentians emanated a gentle scent from the bouquet she rested on her shoulders. She offered those flowers and turned her back to the grave, sitting on a suitable ledge around it, unconcerned about being considered rude.
“Dear God, you dodged a bullet. This world continues to be so harsh and filthy. Sometimes, I do think that maybe I’d be better off getting away from it earlier, like you did. But even then, guess what, I got the Best Lead Actress award; don’t you think it’s quite the achievement for me?”
She continued to talk to no one.
“Well, Akane Kurokawa and I both shared the prize. I’m not too happy about that, but I still wanted to report that I reached one of my goals.”
“But that’s not all…” Kana raised the corners of her mouth.
“I’ll travel the world and work for Hollywood. I’ll live life to its last breath and become an era-defining actress, so influential that even the prime minister will express condolences at my death and be talked about for thousands of years to come.”
She raised her head to the blue sky, which offered no response, and yet, Kana continued her solitary vent.
“What do you think? You’re jealous, right? These are all things you can’t do anymore. Tell me you’re jealous, that you envy me for living. Show some regret, say, ‘If only I hadn’t died.’”
Kana’s voice became increasingly feeble, and, bit by bit, her usual foul mouth came out, giving voice to her feelings.
“Shit, this is so damn infuriating. At least show some guts and crawl out of there, even as a zombie.”
Then, one more time…
As she tried to continue her rant, a lonely tear fell down her face.

“Damn it, an actress’s tears are nothing to make light of. I wonder if you ever understood that. After all, I’m always crying in front of you.”

Crying at the snap of a finger was no longer part of Kana’s arsenal. She wished to no longer have her image as an actress associated with that, a way to part ways with her child actress days.

Goodbye, crybaby me.

And so she thought, but now her eyes were soaked in tears. They were tears of a grieving and broken heart. Deep inside, her heart was still shaped by the lingering memories of him, unable to ever fully recover from the abrupt separation it suffered.

It’s not like I could ever forget.

The joy of meeting him again after all I went through as a child actress.

How delighted I felt after finding out he was still acting.

I can still vividly remember the memories of the youth I had alongside him.

“I’ll never forget.”

Kana Arima laughed as tears still rolled down her face. *I’ll make this pain part of me and laugh it all off.*

Everything I go through will become a part of my acting. Be it this pain in my chest or all hardships I may face, I’ll use it all to push through in this world as an actress.

Just look at me. I still haven’t forgotten my promise.

“I’ll be your star,” that’s what I swore back then.

Then watch me.

The stubborn and tough Kana Arima.

I’ll become a star, dazzling unlike any other. One who shines across even the bright sky.